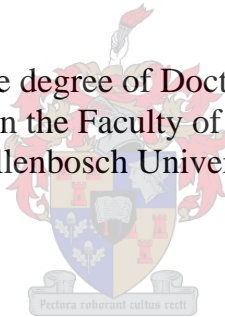


# **Church Unity and Social Contexts: The Ecumenical Debate on Ecclesiology and Ethics**

by  
Sipho Sidwell Mahokoto

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Supervisor: Prof. Robert R. Vosloo

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## Declaration

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## Abstract

This study is motivated by challenges arising from decades' long debates, conversations and tensions regarding church unity within the ecumenical movement and also amongst the Reformed churches locally and globally. This study seeks to investigate the role that church unity can play in relation to social contexts. This study argues that there is no adequate ecclesiology without ethics, and – theologically speaking – no adequate ethics without ecclesiology. Church unity can play a significant role in society, especially with regard to socio-ethical issues regarding peace, reconciliation and justice. Furthermore, regarding the visible unity of the church, this study proposes a meaningful and purposeful unity and ecumenism as the church's contribution through witness and service in the world. Church unity is not just about abstractly fulfilling the dream of being one, holy church, but rather about claiming and seeking a unity that has significance for social contexts. Put differently: *koinonia* and *martyria*, communion and witness, community and confession, the body of Christ and the embodiment of justice are tightly interwoven.

This study will focus on ecclesiology and its relation to ethics as articulated in the discourse of the World Council of Churches (WCC) project on Ecclesiology and Ethics, as well as on the discourse on (church) unity, reconciliation and justice around the Uniting Reformed Church in Southern Africa's (URCSA's) Belhar Confession. This study will explore the tensions between the Faith and Order commission (which focuses on Ecclesiology) and the Life and Work commission (which focuses on Ethics) and also how the tensions between ecclesiology and ethics were dealt with. As means of healing these divisions, this study will discuss the *Church and World* study document of the WCC which affirmed that the unity of the church cannot be disconnected from its witness and service in the world; the Santiago conference on *Koinonia in Faith, Life, and Witness*, where the notion of *koinonia* played a fundamental role in bringing ecclesiology and ethics together; and, in addition, the three WCC consultations under the themes: *Costly Unity* (Rønne), *Costly Commitment* (Tantur) and *Costly Obedience* (Johannesburg), where the interrelations between ecclesiology and ethics were further explored. Key theological notions that played a role in the attempt to bridge the gap between ecclesiology and ethics will also be indicated.

A comparable debate on the call for church unity took place and continues to take place in the South African context, especially amongst the Dutch Reformed family of churches. The reality of divisions in South African context will be explored. The Belhar Confession articulates the relationship between ecclesiology and ethics very clearly with its focus on unity, reconciliation and justice. Belhar affirms that there is no reconciliation without justice, and no justice without reconciliation; these concepts are inextricably interwoven. For a meaning and purposeful church unity, so this dissertation argues, you need both reconciliation and justice. Both the Ecclesiology and Ethics debate of the WCC and the Belhar Confession debate regarding (church) unity, reconciliation and justice affirm that ecclesiology and ethics belong tightly together. This study investigates, enhances, and ultimately affirms this claim.

## Opsomming

Die beweegrede vir hierdie studie is gegrond in die uitdagings van dekade-lange debate, gesprekke en spanninge rakende kerkeenheid binne die ekumeniese beweging sowel as binne die plaaslike en internasionale Gereformeerde kerke. Die studie worstel met die betekenisvolle rol wat kerkeenheid kan speel in verhouding tot ons sosiale kontekste. Dit betoog dat daar geen voldoende ekklesiologie sonder etiek is nie en – teologies gesproke – geen voldoende etiek sonder ekklesiologie. Kerkeenheid kan ‘n belangrike rol in ons gemeenskappe speel, veral ten opsigte van sosio-etiese kwessies rondom vrede, versoening en geregtigheid. Verder, rakende die sigbare eenheid van die kerk, stel hierdie studie ‘n betekenisvolle en doelgerigte eenheid en ekumenisme voor waardeur die kerk haar bydrae kan lewer deur middel van getuienis en diens in hierdie wêreld. Kerkeenheid is juis nie om afgetrokke uitvoering te gee aan die droom van een, heilige kerk nie, maar dit gaan eerder oor die aanspraak en soeke na ‘n eenheid wat betekenisvol is vir sosiale kontekste. Anders gestel: *koinonia* en *martyria*, gemeenskap en getuienis, kerk en belydenis, die liggaam van Christus en die beliggaming van geregtigheid is ten nouste verbonde.

Die navorsing sal fokus op ekklesiologie en die verhouding daarvan tot die etiek, soos uiteengesit in die gesprek van die Wêreld Raad van Kerke (WRK) se projek rakende Ekklesiologie en Etiek. Daarmee saam ook die gesprekke rondom (kerk) eenheid, versoening en geregtigheid (etiek) binne die Verenigende Gereformeerde Kerk in Suider Afrika (VGKSA) se Belhar belydenis. Die navorsing stel ondersoek in na die spanning tussen die “Faith and Order” kommissie (wat fokus op Ekklesiologie) en die “Life and Work” kommissie (wat fokus op Etiek). Dit stel ook ondersoek in na hoe die spanning hanteer was tussen ekklesiologie en etiek. In ‘n poging om die verdeeldheid te heel bespreek hierdie navorsing die “*Church and World*” se dokument van die WRK. Hierdie dokument bevestig dat die eenheid van die kerk nie losgemaak kan word van getuienis en diens in die wêreld nie. Voorbeelde hiervan is geïllustreer tydens die Santiago konferensie wat gehandel het oor *Koinonia in Faith, Life, and Witness* en wat duidelik gewys het dat *koinonia* ‘n fundamentele rol speel om etiek en ekklesiologie saam te bring.. Die drie WRK konsultasies - onder die temas *Costly Unity* (Rønde), *Costly Commitment* (Tantur) and *Costly Obedience* (Johannesburg) – het die verband tussen ekklesiologie en etiek verder ondersoek. Sleutel

teologiese terme wat 'n rol gespeel het in hierdie poging om die gaping tussen ekklesiologie en etiek te oorbrug, sal ook aangedui word.

'n Vergelykbare debat oor die rol van kerkeenheid het plaasgevind in die Suid-Afrikaanse konteks, veral binne die Nederduitse Gereformeerde familie van kerke. Hierdie debatte gaan steeds voort. Die realiteite van skeiding in die Suid-Afrikaanse konteks sal ondersoek word. Die Belhar belydenis verwoord duidelik die verhouding tussen ekklesiologie en etiek, met die fokus op eenheid, versoening en geregtigheid. Die Belhar belydenis – so argumenteer hierdie studie – bevestig dat daar geen versoening is sonder geregtigheid nie, en ook geen geregtigheid sonder versoening nie. Hierdie konsepte is ten nouste en onskeibaar verweef. Hierdie navorsing argumenteer dat beide versoening en geregtigheid nodig is vir 'n betekenisvolle kerkeenheid. Beide die Ekklesiologie en Etiek debat van die WRK sowel as die Belhar belydenis wat aan (kerk)eenheid, versoening en geregtigheid aandag gee, bevestig dat ekklesiologie en etiek bymekaar hoort. Hierdie studie ondersoek, versterk en bevestig hierdie aanspraak.

## Dedication

In honour of my late grandparents, Willie Tototo and Nowinile Jane Mahokoto who nurtured me from childhood. In thankfulness of their love, care and sacrifice. I'm proud of you.

To my mother, Nozibonelo Cynthia Mahokoto, for your love, care and enduring support throughout my life and studies. I'm proud of you and I will always love you Mom.

And to my wife, Marlene Suzet, and two children, Siphosidwell and Sibabalwe Marynthia Eu-Zet Mahokoto, you are special to me, I love you.

Also in special memory of Prof. Hayman Russel Botman (18 October 1953 – 28 June 2014), the former Rector and Vice-Chancellor of Stellenbosch University. Prof. Botman was very passionate about church unity, reconciliation, social justice and transformation. He was a purveyor of HOPE.

**“Swords will be beaten into ploughshares and spears into pruning hooks”**

*The nations shall not do battle nor prepare for war again (Isa.2:4). God's justice is to be revealed (Ps.98:1-2) and finally established. God is a God who wills righteousness for all people.*

## Acknowledgements

I say glory be to God who always remains gracious to us as His people. Glory to God the Father, who carried me through all life obstacles, God the Son, who continues to guide me, and God the Holy Spirit who gives me power and strength to persevere.

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A special thanks to the late Prof. Hayman Russel Botman for his encouragement, his love for education and support in many ways. I had a dream that he will cap me when I receive my degree and that his signature and that of Prof. Nico Koopman will be on my degree certificate.

Lastly to my wife, Marlene, and children, Sipho and Sibabalwe - you are my life. Thank you for your love and that I can share my life with you. My family means a lot to me as I never had a chance to grow up in the presence of both parents. You are so special to me. I love you always!

## Abbreviations

ABRECSA – Alliance of Black Reformed Christians in Southern Africa

ANC – African National Congress

BC – Belhar Confession

BEM – Baptism, Eucharist, Ministry

CI – Christian Institute

CUC – Church Unity Commission

DRC – Dutch Reformed Church

DRCA – Dutch Reformed Church in Africa

DRMC – Dutch Reformed Mission Church

ECD – Early Childhood Development

EFSA – Ecumenical Foundation of Southern Africa

EKD – Evangelische Kirche in Deutschland

ERCA – Evangelical Reformed Church in Africa

FBO – Faith-Based Organization

GK – Gereformeerde Kerk

IRTI – International Reformed Theological Institute

JPIC – Justice, Peace and the Integrity of Creation

KSA – Kairos South Africa

LWF – Lutheran World Federation

MCSA – Methodist Church of Southern Africa

NCLC – National Church Leaders' Consultation

NGO – Non-Governmental Organization

NHKA – Nederduitsch Hervormde Kerk van Afrika

NICSA – National Interfaith Council of South Africa

NILC – National Interfaith Leadership Council

NP – National Party

NRASD – National Religious Association for Social Development

NRLC – National Religious Leaders Council

NRLF – National Religious Leaders Forum

RB – Reformierter Bund

RCA – Reformed Church in Africa

SACC – South African Council of Churches

TEASA – The Evangelical Alliance of South Africa  
TRC – Truth and Reconciliation Commission  
UPCSA – Uniting Presbyterian Church of Southern Africa  
URCSA – Uniting Reformed Church in Southern Africa  
VOC – Vereenigde Oost Indische Compagnie  
WARC – World Alliance of Reformed Churches  
WCC – World Council of Churches  
WCRC – World Communion of Reformed Churches

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# Chapter 1

## Introduction

### 1.1. The focus of the study

The focus of this study is ecclesiology and its relation to ethics as expressed in the discourse of the World Council of Churches (WCC) on Ecclesiology and Ethics (Part I), as well as in the discourse on (church) unity, reconciliation and justice surrounding the Belhar Confession (Part II). In both discourses, I want to argue, one finds the central claim that the unity of the church cannot be fully expressed and be visible enough without the church embodying it through its witness and service in the world. It is often said that unity is strength. The church's unity is indeed its strength, but the lack of unity also puts a question mark behind the church's credibility, especially as it relates to its witness in the world.

The debate on church unity is furthermore of vital significance for the Reformed churches worldwide. The Reformed churches locally and globally have been and are still longing for the unity of the church ever since the divisions that resulted from the time of the 16<sup>th</sup> century European Reformations. The ecumenical movement has also encouraged the unity of churches, especially with regard to their witness and service in the world. The WCC in particular took the call for the visible unity of the church very seriously. This study deals with the ecumenical struggle towards church unity, both globally and locally, thus also taking challenges arising from the South African contexts into account. Therefore this study discusses ecumenical, including the South African, debates on the struggles for the visible unity of the church by looking at the Ecclesiology and Ethics debate of the WCC, as well as at the debate surrounding the Belhar Confession. Hence, the title of this dissertation reads: *Church Unity and Social Contexts<sup>1</sup>: The ecumenical debate on Ecclesiology and Ethics*.

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<sup>1</sup> The phrase 'Social Contexts' refers to various social contexts (plural) in which the member churches of the World Council of Churches are located. They share with each other their local experiences in a global context. The study also refers to the South African context (singular) but also taking cognisance of the fact that even the South African context is comprised of various social contexts. However, since this is an ecumenical study, I use 'social contexts' with reference to various social contexts while at the same time focusing on the specific South African context, especially in the discussion of the Belhar Confession. I must also highlight that the Belhar Confession was born from a specific local context, but that it also has global implications for various social contexts where this confession is received, studied and embodied. Further, I must also point out the close connection of the theme of this dissertation between 'Church Unity and Social Contexts' and 'Ecclesiology and Ethics'. Ecclesiology (church unity) does not take place in a vacuum, its aim is to bring unity and renewal in various social contexts where ethical concerns (Ethics) regarding disunity, inequality, moral formation, reconciliation, justice and peace for the integrity of creation are addressed in social contexts.

## 1.2. Background to the study

This study is placed within the context of the reality of division within the Dutch Reformed family of churches in South Africa, and the struggle for church (re)unification. The Dutch Reformed family of churches is comprised of the Dutch Reformed Church (DRC - mainly for whites), the Dutch Reformed Church in Africa (DRCA - mainly for blacks), the Reformed Church in Africa (RCA – mainly for Indians) and the Uniting Reformed Church in Southern Africa (URCSA –for mixed races). Before giving some background on the establishment of the URCSA and its role in the unity discussions, let me first make some observations regarding the current stance of unity within the Dutch Reformed family of churches. It is very important to take cognisance of the decision of the URCSA Sixth General Synod in Okahandja (Namibia) in 2012 as it reflects a recent stance on the unity process between URCSA and the DRC.

This decision of the URCSA General Synod shed light on future talks about church unity between the URCSA and the DRC, also with regard to the Belhar Confession, given that the DRC church has accepted the proposal to make the Belhar Confession part of its confessional base, albeit through a specific process, at their General Synod of 2011 in Johannesburg.<sup>2</sup> Following this, the 2012 URCSA General Synod of Namibia 2012, the Fifteenth General Synod of the DRC took place from 6-10 October 2013 in Port Elizabeth. The DRC General Synod agreed that the Memorandum of Agreement with the URCSA must proceed in a church

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<sup>2</sup>See [www.urcsa.org.za/documents/Acta\\_Synod2012.pdf](http://www.urcsa.org.za/documents/Acta_Synod2012.pdf) [Accessed 18 October 2013]. See also [www.urcsa.org.za/documents/decisionsGenSynod2012.pdf](http://www.urcsa.org.za/documents/decisionsGenSynod2012.pdf) [Accessed 18 October 2013]. The URCSA Sixth General Synod (GS) in Decision 43 reads: “Recommendation 6 Dutch Reformed Church. The URCSA reported to the General Synod meeting that the DRC overwhelmingly showed its intent to walk on the path of authentic unity by accepting the Belhar Confession and showed its intent on the process of unity (point 2). The General Synod states, ‘This house of the GS URCSA sitting in Okahandja resolves to note and appreciates the breakthrough developments with the DRC recent GS to start a process in a church orderly way to accept the Belhar Confession’ (to replace point 2).” At this Sixth GS of the URCSA in Okahandja, the Synod also underscored that although it cannot be guaranteed and will never be validated in advance that the DRC will keep to its declared vision and commitment, URCSA, in the hope that is in Christ, steps forward and stretches out its hand to the DRC to re-enter the unity process again. It revokes its 2008 decision on a moratorium on talks with all three churches within the DRC family of churches as the other two churches too showed their willingness to take part in the ongoing process of unity (point 3). However, the GS instructs all Regional Synods, Presbyteries and congregations to engage their counterparts within the DRC, DRCA, and RCA with sincerity but firmly as guided by the spirit of the Belhar Confession on all matters that the decision of the lifting of the moratorium will apply, (point 4). As per the Memorandum of Understanding, the GS of the URCSA decided to delete the phrase “accepted the Belhar Confession” from the introduction to the Memorandum of Agreement to be replaced by: “The Executive of the URCSA have met in November 2011, February 2012 and July 2012 to discuss the way forward after the DRC General Synod have started a process to get Belhar Confession to be included as a confession in a church orderly way” (point 7). For all these decisions on Belhar and the DRC, see the decisions of the URCSA Sixth General Synod 2012, Okahandja (Namibia), as well as the minutes of the URCSA Sixth General Synod, especially on Day 3 of the GS, 3 October 2012, decision 43.



orderly way. The General Synod also affirmed that the way forward for the re-unification process must be done in a church orderly way. Furthermore, this DRC General Synod voiced its thankfulness regarding the progress of negotiations and relations with the URCSA.<sup>3</sup> With regard to the Church Order Article 1 of the DRC and the Belhar Confession, the General Synod states:

1. The Dutch Reformed Church is based on the Bible as the holy and infallible Word of God.
- 2.1 The doctrine that the Church confesses in agreement with the Word of God, is expressed in the ecumenical creeds, namely the Apostle's Creed, the Nicene Creed and the Creed of Athanasius; and the Three Forms of Unity, namely the Belgic Confession, the Heidelberg Catechism and the Canons of Dordt.
- 2.2 The Belhar Confession is part of the confessional basis of the Church, in a way that allows members, office bearers and assemblies of the church to confess it as in agreement with the Word of God, as well as members, office bearers and assemblies of the church that do not subscribe to it as a confession.
3. The Church accepts her calling to always confess her faith and that the expansion of her confessional basis should occur without force.<sup>4</sup>

It must be noted that the URCSA leadership is not enthusiastic about the decision of the DRC General Synod with regard to the acceptance of the Belhar Confession. The URCSA regards Church Order Article 1 of the DRC on the Belhar Confession as a neutral formulation of the decision that inhibits the process of church unity. In response to this decision of the DRC General Synod of 2013, the URCSA General Synodical Commission (GSC) states on its official newspaper that it was not positive about the decision, as was the moderator Dr Mary-Anne Plaatjies van Huffel when she called the DRC decision a 'breakthrough'. The GSC says, "It is the conviction of the GSC that the proposed wording of Article 1, clause 2.2 in the confessional basis of the DRC is not acceptable as it stands, for a church order of a finally re-

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<sup>3</sup> See the October 2013 DRC General Synod decision register on church re-unification: <http://www.ngkerkas.co.za/wp-content/2013/09/besluiteregister-algemene-sinode-2013.pdf> [Accessed 24 April 2014].

<sup>4</sup> See the October 2013 DRC General Synod decision register on Church Order Article 1: <http://www.ngkerkas.co.za/wp-content/2013/09/besluiteregister-algemene-sinode-2013.pdf> [Accessed 24 April 2014]. With regard to this Article 1 of the DRC and the Belhar Confession, one can point out that there are still many members of the DRC in the congregational level who still regard the Belhar Confession as a protest or a political document.

united church.”<sup>5</sup> Further to this, the GSC says that the attempt of the DRC to reconcile two contradictory confessional positions creates in the process the danger of the authority of the Confessions to be challenged.<sup>6</sup> However, the negotiations on church reunification between the DRC and the URCSA are still in progress, and at the time of writing there are still some serious challenges and stumbling blocks on the way. This process has a long history and attempts to make progress have had ambiguous results. There are numerous stories of success and failure in this struggle for reunification. It can be argued that the challenges and stumbling blocks towards the unity of these churches are more than just the question of the Belhar Confession’s status of being a Church confession or not.

At this stage of the study, it can merely be noted that many meetings were held between the churches and its leadership. On 20 November 2012, for instance, the four Moderators of the Dutch Reformed family of churches, namely, the DRC, URCSA, DRCA and the RCA, met to discuss the progress and development with regard to the unity process, especially between the URCSA and the DRC. At that meeting it was decided to call a meeting of the four Moderamens to hold further discussions on unity and to seek possible ways in which the four churches could work together.

This meeting indeed took place on 20 June 2013 in Kempton Park under the leadership and facilitation of the President of the World Communion of Reformed Churches (WCRC), Dr. Jerry Pillay. A statement from the meeting was then drafted and released. The significant point of the statement of the four Moderamens reads:

We recognised that we meet at a very crucial time in the history and experience in South Africa which calls for unity and witness of Christians as we address the challenges in our times, and appreciated the positive messages the unity of the DRC Family would send to South Africa and beyond.<sup>7</sup>

The significant point made by this statement propels the church not only to focus on church unity, but also on its visible witness and service in the world that is full of challenges and threats. This understanding of church unity in relation to Christian witness relates strongly to the discourse of the WCC *Church and World* study document’s perspective that the unity of

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<sup>5</sup> See *URCSA News*, 13 December 2013. *DRC’s new Article 1 not acceptable to URCSA-GSC draws line in the confessional sand*. Official Newspaper of the Uniting Reformed Church in Southern Africa, 2013, 1.

<sup>6</sup> See *URCSA News*, 2013, 1.

<sup>7</sup> For further reading on the significant points of the statement of the four Moderamens of the DR family of churches, see [www.urcsa.org.za/statement/](http://www.urcsa.org.za/statement/) [Accessed 18 October 2013].

the church cannot be disconnected from its witness and service in the world. A more detailed discussion of *Church and World* with regard to this perspective will be carried out in chapter two of this study. However, it must be noted that the unity process between these churches will probably still take many years to conclude, irrespective of the acceptance of the Belhar Confession. Even the full acceptance of the Belhar Confession by the DRC will not mean that church unity will come easy; this is just another step – albeit an important step – towards the church unity process.

An important movement in the process of reunification within the DR family of churches was the structural unity of the DRCA (with mainly Black members),<sup>8</sup> and the DRMC (with mainly Coloured members).<sup>9</sup> These churches united under a new name, namely, the Uniting Reformed Church in Southern Africa (URCSA) on the 14<sup>th</sup> of April 1994. This new church, however, is made up of only two former churches of the Dutch Reformed family of churches, namely the DRCA and the DRMC. The DRC, the DRCA, and the RCA are not part of the new church yet. The reason why I mention the DRCA again is that not all the members of the DRCA joined the new URCSA when it united in April 1994. For various reasons, some sections of the church did not opt for unification, especially in the Northern Cape, Free State, and in the Eastern Cape.<sup>10</sup> The long negotiation process towards unity is therefore still in progress, and many people have found this process exhausting and tiresome. Several questions have arisen in this regard, such as: Is unity still of any worth? Is it worth investing so much energy into the process of working for unity? Why do we need unity? And what contribution will church unity have on the South African society? What impact can church unity have in the world? What would be the significance of church unity for society? Can church unity make any difference in social contexts?

These questions are not new, and they are not limited to the Dutch Reformed family of churches. In recent decades, two very important church debates brought the question of the social significance of church unity to the fore, namely, the debate on Ecclesiology and Ethics

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<sup>8</sup> A mistake is often made when referring to the Black DRCA as consisting only of Xhosa people. The DRCA is comprised of different cultural groups and not only Xhosa people.

<sup>9</sup> The DRMC was comprised of Black people who are called Coloured people since the apartheid era. The reference to Coloured people here is simply an attempt to show how the division between people was made in South Africa for decades under apartheid and segregation rule.

<sup>10</sup> See P. Coertzen, 1999. Church and State in South Africa in 1998: In *European Journal for Church and State Research*, Volume 6, Peeters. 1999, 305-309. For some of the reasons why the DRCA did not join the unification process, see also P. Coertzen, 2003:2. The Road of Unity in the Family of Dutch Reformed Churches in South Africa since 1994: A Dutch Reformed Perspective. In: *Scriptura* 83, 2003:2, 332-338.

of the World Council of Churches and the debate surrounding the Uniting Reformed Church in Southern Africa's Belhar Confession (1982, 1986). These two church debates (or discourses) on church unity will be the main focus of this study. This study will offer a thorough engagement with these discourses, especially by being attentive to the relationship between church unity and its social significance. The focus will be on how the church unity expressed in the Ecclesiology and Ethics debate, as well as in the Belhar Confession debate, can contribute positively to the engagement with social contexts. The interrelationship between these two discourses will also be highlighted and discussed.

### **1.3. The Ecclesiology and Ethics debate of the WCC**

The first important church debate dealing with the question of the social significance of church unity that this study will focus on is the Ecclesiology and Ethics debate of the WCC. Within the WCC, the awareness grew over many years that the unity discussions in the "Faith and Order" (doctrine) section cannot be separated from social-ethical discussions in the "Life and Work" (ethics) section.<sup>11</sup> However, during the process that led to the formation of the WCC in 1948, the Faith and Order movement played a fundamental role in discussing the ecclesiological meaning of unity, as well as the ecclesiological significance of the WCC. The Danish systematic theologian Peter Lodberg argues that the fathers of Faith and Order tried to keep the balance between the quest for a theological understanding of church unity and the real existing disunity amongst confessional churches by implementing a double strategy. The double strategy that was used stressed the importance of the pre-existing hidden *una sancta* in the visibly separated churches on the one hand, whilst the strategy wanted to formulate a consensus on the other hand of how the ideal of church unity might be realised in the world.<sup>12</sup> This strategy wanted to find a way to indicate how the church could make its unity visible to the world.

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<sup>11</sup> The term 'Ecclesiology' refers to the church and its doctrines pertaining to unity, *koinonia*, hope and memory, Eucharist and Baptism. And 'Ethics' refers to or involves particularly the notions of the church as 'moral community' (one which *necessarily* struggles, in the light of the gospel, with issues of moral import) and of 'moral formation', that includes the training in ethical decision-making and discernment which comes through formal church teaching but more pervasively through the whole array of church life, and not least through its worship. Among a range of other ethical concerns addressed in this dissertation are reconciliation and justice issues in church and society.

<sup>12</sup> See P. Lodberg, 1995. The History of Ecumenical Work on the Ecclesiology and Ethics: In *Ecumenical Review* Volume 47 No. 2. April, 128-129.

In this regard, Lodberg further argues that the insights of the Dutch theologian Willem Adolph Visser't Hooft (who became the first secretary general of the WCC in 1948 until his retirement in 1966) were taken up by the Faith and Order world conference in Montreal in 1963 under the heading *The Church in the Purpose of God*. The insights of Visser't Hooft on a functional ecclesiology with an interpretation of history as a history of salvation, together with Barth's Christological principle, created space for a positive understanding of ethics in relation to ecclesiology. Lodberg affirms that the church also has an ethical thrust. It also inspires and motivates human beings to react to various forms of social, racial, and economic injustices and to strive with all its strength for peace and world cooperation.<sup>13</sup> Lodberg states that for Visser't Hooft the theological challenge is not merely discussions about the *esse* of the church, but also about the tasks of the church in the world.<sup>14</sup> It must be noted that the emphasis at the Montreal conference specifically focused on the ethical dimension of the church and its response to socio-ethical challenges that continued to come to the fore.

The American theologian Paul A. Crow further states that in Montreal it was pointed out that one should be sensitive to the relation between the unity of the church and the unity of the human community. An observation was made that the Faith and Order movement must not only focus on itself, but must also face the world and its challenges with a solidarity that serves. At this Montreal conference, the participants and the churches were encouraged to understand the search for ecclesial reconciliation within the context of the world's divisions and the broader struggles for justice and hope. Crow underscores the point with reference to the fact that baptism is not merely the sacrament of the unity of the church, but also the sacrament of the unity and reconciliation of all persons and all creation in the life of God.<sup>15</sup>

Following the Montreal world conference of 1963, Lodberg further observes that the Uppsala conference in 1968 affirmed that the church is sent to the world in the Holy Spirit, whereby it becomes what it is intended to be, namely a renewed and renewing community. Not only is the world renewed, but also the church itself.<sup>16</sup> The unity of the church in this regard will enhance the relationship amongst its own members and the society they come from. The members of the church belong to a specific community that requires this unity. In his

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<sup>13</sup> See Lodberg, *The History of Ecumenical Work*, 1995, 130.

<sup>14</sup> See Lodberg, *The History of Ecumenical Work*, 1995, 130.

<sup>15</sup> See P.A. Crow. 1993. *The Legacy of Four World Conferences on Faith and Order: In Ecumenical Review* Volume 45 No. 1, January 1993, 25.

<sup>16</sup> See Lodberg, *The History of Ecumenical Work*, 1995, 130.

reflection on the conference, Lodberg also convincingly argues that unity within the church is established by working for unity in the world outside the church. In the same way, the work for unity in the world will influence the life of the church. However, Uppsala recommended that more work be done on the relationship between the unity of the church and the unity of humankind.<sup>17</sup> This recommendation touches on the theme of this study, especially on the significance of church unity and its relation towards social contexts.

In the same year of the Uppsala conference, in March 1968 at Zagorsk, a consultation on theological issues concerning church and society took place, where it was argued that the starting point should be the double relationship between Christ and the *humanum* and between Christ and the church. Lodberg argues that the point was clearly made that the church must recognise this double relationship and should not turn its back on the *humanum*. In the search for church unity, the point was made that the churches must be open to recognise other popular movements as sources of inspiration and innovation. However, a further argument was that the unity of the church must express itself as a community acting in solidarity with the victims of social and political disorder in society. The social action is now understood to be an authentic part of the mission of the church.<sup>18</sup> This means that the churches must work closer with those victims in serving justice and reconciliation for societal renewal. It must be understood that in most of these consultations, the main aim was to find a way of combining the Faith and Order and the Life and Work traditions.

In an article, titled *Living Unity? On the ecumenical movement and globalisation*, the renowned South African theologian Dirkie Smit gives a helpful outline of the work of the Ecumenical Movement in bringing the Faith and Order section and Life and Work section together as Ecclesiology and Ethics under the vision of *koinonia*. Smit comments that the major concern in this process was related to the work of the church in the world as a social ethic, as a *koinonia* ethic. Smit argues that the focus of Faith and Order has been on the visible unity of churches in the world, both globally and locally. There have been a lot of shifts regarding the nature of this unity and several descriptions have complemented, replaced or contradicted one another. He further argues that Faith and Order always understood that endeavours towards achieving the unity of the church and endeavours towards common

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<sup>17</sup> See Lodberg, *The History of Ecumenical Work*, 1995, 130-131.

<sup>18</sup> See Lodberg, *The History of Ecumenical Work*, 1995, 135.

witness and service in the world should be held together.<sup>19</sup> He points to the work done respectively on “Unity of the church and the unity of humankind” and “The community of women and men in the church” as a reflection of these efforts. In addition, he also mentioned that the WCC document called *Church and World: The unity of the church and the renewal of human community* is the result of these programmes.

Smit argues that the *Church and World* study document’s purpose is to affirm and explore the inter-relation between two fundamental ecumenical tasks; the search for the visible unity of Christ’s church, which is very costly, and the search for common Christian proclamation, witness and service as expressions of God’s mission and love for a world crying out for renewal.<sup>20</sup> In line with *Church and World*, Smit states that Christians and churches live in this world and share in its anxieties and hopes. Called to become what it is, the church knows that this striving is not for the sake of the church alone, but it is in and for the world that God calls the church. The task of the church, as well as its identity, is understood from the point of view of God’s kingdom both as a mystery and a prophetic sign.<sup>21</sup> These two concepts, namely, mystery and prophetic sign, will also be discussed in more detail in the next chapter. The *Church and World* document is crucial for the theme of this dissertation, as it introduces fundamental questions and challenges that face the church in the world and how the church responds to such challenges. *Church and World* strongly emphasises the significance of church unity, which cannot be disconnected from the church’s witness and service in the world.

The nature and the task of the church is also clearly analysed in the ecumenical study of the World Council of Churches under the theme: *The Nature and Mission of the Church: A stage on the way to a common statement*.<sup>22</sup> This study on the nature and purpose of the church was

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<sup>19</sup> See D. J. Smit, 2003:3. Living Unity? On the Ecumenical Movement and Globalisation: In *Scriptura* 84. 2003:3, 425 Dirkie Smit is a South African systematic theologian. He is a minister of the Uniting Reformed Church in Southern Africa and he was involved in the drafting of the Belhar Confession in 1982 during the DRMC Synod and during its final product in 1986. See also the same article: D.J. Smit, 2007. Living Unity? On the Ecumenical Movement and Globalization: In *Essays in Public Theology. Collected Essays 1, Study Guides in Religion and Theology 12*, edited by Ernst M. Conradie, Sun Press Publication, Stellenbosch, 2007, 257-273.

<sup>20</sup> See Smit, Living Unity? 2003:3, 425-426.

<sup>21</sup> See Smit, Living Unity? 2003:3, 426.

<sup>22</sup>For more information on the nature and the task of the church, see *The Nature and Mission of the Church: A stage on the way to a common statement*. Faith and Order Paper No. 198, WCC, Geneva, 2005. It must be noted that this document has also been thoroughly reworked. See *The Church: Towards a Common Vision*. Faith and Order Paper No.214, WCC, Geneva, 2013, 1-46. This document wrestles with serious questions concerning an ecclesiology that does not disconnect itself from its vocation of witness and service in the world. One of the significant questions of this documents is the question on what can we say together about the church of the



strongly recommended by the Fifth World Conference on Faith and Order held at Santiago de Compostela in 1993. In this Faith and Order paper, the nature of the church is described as a gift of God, the creation of the Word and of the Holy Spirit. The church is called into being by the Father “who so loved the world that he gave his only begotten Son, that whoever believes in him shall not perish, but have eternal life” (John 3:16), and who sent the Holy Spirit to lead these believers into all truth, reminding them all that Jesus taught (John 14:26).<sup>23</sup> Here, the Faith and Order paper emphasise that the church belongs to God, is God’s gift and cannot exist by and for itself. By its very nature, the church is missionary, called and sent to serve, as an instrument of the Word and Spirit, as a witness to the kingdom of God.<sup>24</sup> With reference to some Biblical insights, the church is seen in these different forms: As people of God, the Body of Christ, the Temple of the Holy Spirit, and *Koinonia* / Communion. The mission of the church is to gather all creation under the Lordship of Christ and to bring humanity and all creation into communion. The notion of *koinonia* will be discussed in more detail in chapter three. Furthermore, the mission of the church is to serve the purpose of God as a gift given to the world in order that all may believe.<sup>25</sup> Again, the nature and the mission of the church strongly emphasise the relation between the unity of the church and its significance to social contexts as a theme of this study.

At the Seoul meeting of Life and Work in Korea in 1990, all the member churches were engaged in a conciliar process of mutual commitment to justice, peace, and the integrity of creation (JPIC). The Seoul convocation tried to maintain the interconnection between ethics and ecclesiology in its final message by introducing the concept of *kairos*, showing the emergency of certain ethical challenges to the churches. Two expressions, “conciliar process” and “covenant” are ecclesiologically very important. They demonstrate the underlying intention to commit churches in a unified and binding manner to confront the life and death issues of the time. The notion of *koinonia* grew as a possible vision that could integrate these two concerns (the conciliar process and covenant). However, the theological interests changes from debates on the nature of church unity to reflections on the ethical function of the church. This notion of *koinonia* expresses the kind of visible unity that the church seek and that this communion must be expressed in the witness and service of the church in the world. It must

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Triune God in order to grow in communion, to struggle together for justice and peace in the world, and to overcome together our past and present divisions.

<sup>23</sup> See *The Nature and Mission of the Church*, 2005, 13.

<sup>24</sup> See *The Nature and Mission of the Church*, 2005, 13.

<sup>25</sup> See *The Nature and Mission of the Church*, 2005, 16-25.



be noted that any form of *koinonia* has its own challenges that intend to destroy its existence. By this I mean that any unity has its own internal or external challenges that aim at destroying any cooperation, sharing, and fellowship that keep this unity (*koinonia*) intact.

Lodberg rightly asserts that it is in the daily conflicts of human life that the unity of the churches is tested, and the way the churches deal with the social, political and economic conflicts shows the quality of the conciliar fellowship in the church. In this regard one can think back to the South African situation during the apartheid system and how the churches and human community united against the socio-political and economic situation in which they found themselves. In the South African situation, the common goal was to abolish inequality and the apartheid system that threatened the life of the church and that of the broader human community.

Reflecting on the notion of *koinonia*, Susan Moore states that in the writings of the New Testament this notion expressed ideas close to the heart of the early Christian's common life. She argues that later theology took up the word to express the loving communion, the unity in diversity, of the persons of the Trinity, and it also depicted the church as a fellowship that echoes God's *koinonia*.<sup>26</sup> She further notes that *koinonia* carries a wide range of meanings; community, communion, sharing, fellowship, participation, partnership, solidarity, and it also denotes spiritual relationship, and sharing worldly goods. In her argument, Moore contends that in this *koinonia*, within God's loving communion, diversity is held together without separation, whilst at the same time unity is enriched by diversity. Moore argues that if the church echoes *koinonia*, then unity and diversity belong together in the church.<sup>27</sup> *Koinonia* brings expressions of diversity and unity together without separating them, and unity is enriched by diversity.

The same notion of *koinonia* played a pivotal role in the proceedings of the fifth world conference of Faith and Order in Santiago de Compostela in 1993, where the notion of visible unity was further developed. The relation between the church and the wider human community became a new and thoroughgoing perspective for the reflection on the unity of the church. In preparations for the fifth world conference in Santiago de Compostela a discussion

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<sup>26</sup> See S. Moore, 1995. "Towards Koinonia in Faith, Life and Witness": Theological Insights and Emphases from the Fifth World Conference on Faith and Order. In *Ecumenical Review* Volume 47, 1995, 4.

<sup>27</sup> See Moore, "Towards Koinonia in Faith, Life and Witness" 1995, 6.

of Faith and Order under the theme *Towards Koinonia in Faith, Life and Witness: A discussion paper* was tabled. This discussion paper will be dealt with more extensively in chapter three of this dissertation. After the Santiago de Compostela conference an official report of the conference, titled *On the Way to Fuller Koinonia*, was published.<sup>28</sup> One of Santiago's aims was to help churches relate the search for unity to their call to be effective signs of God's purpose for humanity and creation.

With regard to the notion of *koinonia*, one can argue that the document points towards the fact that each local Christian community is called to a unity that is a unity of absolute interdependence (1 Cor.12:21). No member of the same body can reject another; they need one another and depend on each other. Such unity will help the members of the church and members of the community to come closer to each other, to share with each other and live in communion with each other and be dependent on one another. Margaret Jenkins rightly argues that the Faith and Order document on *Baptism, Eucharist and Ministry* (BEM), together with the responses to it by many churches, give evidence of an important and widely affirmed ecumenical advance. Reflecting on the concept of *koinonia* and the communion to which we are called, Jenkins states: "Because this communion embraces the whole of our existence, we cannot reflect on the specific concerns of sharing a common life in Christ in isolation from *koinonia* in faith and witness."<sup>29</sup> Jenkins' point of departure is that the sacraments and service are expressions of the same faith that we share and actualise in our Christian witness to the world. In fact, this point of Jenkins attempts to express the social significance of church unity and thus resonates with the central concern of this study, namely the relationship between church unity and the witness in social contexts. The deliberate reason behind the recent focus on *koinonia* was the attempt to bring ecclesiological and ethical concerns together in a new and fruitful way.

The discussions at Santiago de Compostela on the notion of *koinonia* led to three consultations, namely *Costly Unity*, *Costly Commitment* and *Costly Obedience*. These consultations took place, respectively, at Rønne in Denmark in 1993, at Tantur in Israel in 1994, and in Johannesburg in South Africa in 1996. The reports on these three conferences are compiled in one convenient volume, titled *Ecclesiology and Ethics: Ecumenical ethical*

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<sup>28</sup> See Smit, *Living Unity?* 2003:3,427.

<sup>29</sup> See M. Jenkins, 1993. *Towards Koinonia in Life*: In *Ecumenical Review* Volume 45, No.1. January 1993.

*engagement, Moral formation and the nature of the church.* These reports will be dealt with thoroughly in chapter four of this dissertation.

*Costly Unity* is the first report of the meeting in Rønne, Denmark in 1993. The ecumenical movement struggled to bring the discourse on justice, peace and the integrity of creation process and the unity discussions together. According to *Costly Unity*, one of the reasons to meet at Rønne was to engage in a serious dialogue about these long-lived tensions and divisions.<sup>30</sup> Moreover, as Smit underscores, at Rønne it was proposed that the church be viewed as a moral community.<sup>31</sup> On the one hand, Rønne affirmed that cheap unity avoids morally contested issues because they would disturb church unity, whilst on the other hand, costly unity in the church as moral community reveals the churches' unity as a gift of pursuing justice and peace. The churches should promote justice, peace and the integrity of creation. Amongst other respondents at this consultation, William Henn is of the opinion that *Costly Unity* attempts to draw lines of continuity between the nature of the church and the church's advocacy for justice, peace and the integrity of creation. This led to a general impression that the costly unity study relates to ecclesiology and ethics.<sup>32</sup>

The Edinburgh theologian Duncan Forrester is also of the opinion that, just like grace, costly unity is a precious gift that requires a costly response. Nevertheless, it has been gained for us by Jesus; we need to show its reality in a world that is still full of division, conflict, suspicion and hostility. However, it is evident that the church unification that is needed is the sort that will have an impact on societal renewal and upholds reconciliation and justice as instruments for renewing the church and society. According to Forrester, we need to live out the unity and *shalom* that Christ has won and that unity cannot materialise without taking risks as the life of faith is a life of risk-taking.<sup>33</sup> Given that church unity is costly, the church's task is to take discipleship seriously. Rønne argued that costly unity calls the church to transcend loyalty to blood and soil, nation and ethnic or class heritage in the name of the God who is one and

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<sup>30</sup> See *Costly Unity*, 1997. In *Ecclesiology and Ethics: Ecumenical Ethical Engagement, Moral Formation and the Nature of the Church*. Thomas F. Best and Martin Robra (eds.), WCC, Geneva, 1997, 2.

<sup>31</sup> See Smit, *Living Unity?* 2003:3, 428.

<sup>32</sup> See W. Henn, 1995. Reactions and Responses... to *Costly Unity* and to the Discussion in Santiago: A Roman Catholic Perspective. In *Ecumenical Review* Volume 47, No.2, April, 140. Henn argues that in terms of ecclesiology and ethics or *koinonia* and ethics, these two terms refer to engagement on behalf of justice, peace and the integrity of creation.

<sup>33</sup> See D. Forrester, 1997. *The True Church and Morality: Reflections on Ecclesiology and Ethics*. Risk Book Series. Geneva, WCC, 15. Duncan Forrester served as a Dean of the Faculty of Divinity, New College at the University of Edinburgh in Scotland.

whose creation is one. Rønne further stated that it is the unity of the church accomplished on the way of the cross, paid for by the life of Christ and the lives of the martyrs, whose witness inevitably included a moral dimension.<sup>34</sup>

Accordingly, costly unity is the discovery of the church's unity in struggles for peace and justice. Costly unity can come only when the real sources of conflict, distrust, injustices and violence, apartheid, and old grievances, which constantly refresh bitterness, are addressed and wrestled with and gradually healed at their source. The question can be asked whether the DR family of churches have undertaken sufficiently the same processes of addressing the past with the aim for peace and justice in dealing with the tensions and conflicts within the circles of these churches. This question will be addressed later in the study. It can be said though that this unity, by God's grace, breaks down the dividing walls so that we can be reconciled with God and with one another. As mentioned earlier, the struggle of the DR family of churches for unity reaches beyond the acceptance or the rejection of the Belhar Confession. One has to take cognisance of the long racial demarcations and continued inequality caused by the apartheid system. The question can be asked whether the costly response from these churches can lead them to an authentic form of church unity, a church unity that can contribute positively towards social contexts.

*Costly Commitment*, the report from the meeting in 1994 at the Tantur Ecumenical Institute in Israel, is the second report that requires our attention. During the Tantur consultation the relationship between ecclesiology and ethics was explored, as well as the fundamental vocation of the church and of Christians who work together in facing crucial ethical issues of this time. According to *Costly Commitment*, churches need to recommit themselves to work for justice, peace and the integrity of creation, linking the search for sacramental communion of the church more closely with the struggles for peace and justice.<sup>35</sup> Regarding this *Costly Commitment* consultation, Smit notes that the description of the church as moral community during Rønne was revisited at Tantur. He states that churches, as moral communities, are called to commit themselves to one another, recognising that they need each other on their ecumenical journey. Such commitment to one another is an important layer for their common

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<sup>34</sup> See *Costly Unity: Ecclesiology and Ethics*, 1997, 6. *Costly Unity* further argues that JPIC as a process has often borne testimony to this costly unity in which its enemy is cheap unity, forgiveness without repentance, baptism without discipleship, life without daily dying and rising in a household of faith that is to be the visible sign of God's desire for the whole inhabited earth. *Costly Unity: Ecclesiology and Ethics*, 1997, 6.

<sup>35</sup> See *Costly Commitment: Ecclesiology and Ethics*, 1997, 26.

reflection and action.<sup>36</sup> It became increasingly evident that the road to a costly unity necessarily leads through a costly commitment of the churches to one another. *Costly Commitment* asserts that the continuing divisions on important matters of faith, order, life and work have often prevented the churches from offering a unified witness on crucial ethical issues. However, Tantur argued that the divisions amongst churches reveal the brokenness of their *koinonia* and hamper their prophetic mission and service in the world.<sup>37</sup>

The *Costly Obedience* consultation was the third meeting held in Johannesburg, South Africa in 1996. It was just two years into democracy in this country, and the nightmare of apartheid had just recently ended officially in South Africa. According to *Costly Obedience*, the theme of moral formation was pursued in Johannesburg by asking what it might mean to speak of the church as a global communion of moral witnessing. In response to this question, the *Costly Obedience* consultation discovered that the obedience to which the church is called, is often costly.<sup>38</sup> In line with *Costly Obedience*, Smit argues that it may require the churches to position themselves in relation to the issues of particular times and places in ways that call for courage, perseverance and sacrifice. Such faithfulness may even come to the point of martyrdom.<sup>39</sup> In summary of these various meetings, Smit clearly points out that the *koinonia* to which the *oikoumene* (household) is called, which involves communion in faith, in life, and in witness, takes the form of costly unity – which means that faith involves discipleship – and calls the churches to costly commitment to one another, as well as to costly obedience, facing the struggles for life of every age.<sup>40</sup> *Costly Obedience* states that the terminology of moral community was avoided, in which a new terminology of the household was used in bringing together the ecological, economic and ecumenical dimensions of our lives. However, in the church's own struggle for justice, peace, and the integrity of creation, the new *esse* (the being) of the church is at stake.<sup>41</sup> This is why the obedience of the church is costly. As Christians, we speak of an *oikoumene* offered by God in Jesus Christ to the human race. This is called the household of life, where justice, peace and the care of creation's integrity prevail.

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<sup>36</sup> See Smit, *Living Unity?* 2003:3, 429. Smit highlights the fact that the road to costly unity necessarily leads to a costly commitment of the churches to one another. Those churches who have previously been wary of moral reductionism should now commit themselves to the ethical character of the church. Those who have been deeply involved in ethical praxis only, should commit themselves also to ecclesial renewal. See also *Costly Commitment: Ecclesiology and Ethics*, 1997, 25-29.

<sup>37</sup> See *Costly Commitment: Ecclesiology and Ethics*, 1997, 25.

<sup>38</sup> See *Costly Obedience: Ecclesiology and Ethics*, 1997, 51.

<sup>39</sup> See Smit, *Living Unity?* 2003:3, 429. See *Costly Obedience: Ecclesiology and Ethics*, 1997, 51-52.

<sup>40</sup> See Smit, *Living Unity?* 2003:3, 430.

<sup>41</sup> See *Costly Obedience: Ecclesiology and Ethics*, 1997, 50-51.

*Costly Obedience* states that if the church is to fulfil its calling to be a sign of God's kingdom, it is imperative that it begin to understand itself as an ecumenical moral community.<sup>42</sup> *Costly Obedience* understands that the moral formation in the church seeks to generate communities in touch with the world and all its problems, yet shaped in a daily telling and retelling of the Christian story. Such kind of moral formation makes generation after another of disciples.

In short: *Costly Unity*, *Costly Commitment*, and *Costly Obedience* pose a big challenge for the church. These consultations and reports point to the importance that the church understands itself as an ethical community or moral community. After understanding its role in society with its visible and costly unity, the church will enhance reconciliation and justice in social contexts. Moreover, a thorough investigation of this ecclesiology and ethics debate that increasingly recognises the importance of unity for social-ethical issues like social justice will help to shed light on the questions addressed by this study. In the process this study also seeks to indicate key theological motifs that played a role in bridging the gap between ecclesiology and ethics.

#### **1.4. The Belhar Confession Debate**

The second part of this dissertation (chapters 5-7) deals with the question of the relation between ecclesiology and ethics in the South African context as articulated in the Belhar Confession and the discourse surrounding it. Here, the debate around the Belhar Confession, officially accepted by the General Synod of the Dutch Reformed Mission Church (DRMC) in 1986, and now a confession of the URCSA, will be used as a guiding source in an attempt to articulate adequately the relationship between ecclesiology and ethics in the light of challenges arising from the South African context. The title of this study (*Church Unity and Social Contexts: The ecumenical debate on Ecclesiology and Ethics*) prompts us to enquire whether ecclesiology has anything to do with ethics and further seeks to understand what role the church can play in social contexts. The Belhar Confession is an important church document and confession, which deals theologically with the issues of church unity, reconciliation and justice. However, this well-known confession is being used nationally, as well as internationally, by churches to deal with various questions regarding unity,

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<sup>42</sup> See *Costly Obedience: Ecclesiology and Ethics*, 1997, 52.

reconciliation and justice from a Christian perspective.<sup>43</sup> The three fundamental articles of the Belhar Confession, as some will call it, emphasise unity, reconciliation and justice respectively. The Belhar Confession indicates that unity impacts on reconciliation and justice in church and society. In the Belhar Confession, unity, reconciliation and justice go hand in hand and cannot be separated. The unity of the church will foster the reconciliation of people and the actualisation of justice.

One can argue in the light of the Belhar Confession that unity in one way or another endorses and proposes a call for justice and reconciliation, especially for the Dutch Reformed family of churches and South African society. Unity does not propose any negative differences, negative diversity, inequality, injustice or segregation amongst humanity. Unity proposes oneness, equality, fairness, justice, reconciliation, togetherness, fellowship and trust. People therefore need to have a dream and a vision of what kind of a church and society they are dreaming to have and to be. The unity of the church and society should be one that refuses any injustices, marginalisation, and dehumanisation of other fellow human beings,

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<sup>43</sup> For the reception of the Belhar Confession nationally and internationally see, P. Naudé, 2010. *Neither Calendar nor Clock: Perspectives on the Belhar Confession*, William B. Eerdmans, Michigan, 2010, 131-148. Naudé gives a narrative description of how the Belhar Confession was accepted and taken seriously in different parts of the church. He explains that the Reformierten Bund and Lippische Landeskirche in collaboration with the Evangelisch-Reformierte Kirche in Germany commenced a study and explication process in May 1998 in Detmold, Germany, with the interest in the relationship between Barmen (1934) and Belhar (1986), and the significance of the Belhar Confession for their contemporary context. The Reformed Ecumenical Council (REC), at its meeting in Harare in 1988, introduced a process of reception. Naudé states that in the unification process of the DRMC and the DRCA in April 1994 to form the URCSA, the Belhar Confession was brought into the process by the DRMC and was accepted as the confession of the new church, namely URCSA. Belhar was formerly accepted outside South Africa by the Protestant churches in Belgium in 1998 at their Synod at Pâturages. The Reformed Church in America (RCA) also embarked on a process to accept the Belhar Confession. Naudé states that at their General Synod of 2000 their Commission on Christian Unity was instructed to commend the Belhar Confession to the church for reflection, study, and respond as means of deepening the RCA's commitment to dealing with racism and strengthening its ecumenical commitment to the URCSA and other Reformed churches. The Belhar Confession was accepted at the General Synod in Pella, Iowa, in June 2007. Amongst other churches in the process of receiving the Belhar Confession is the Presbyterian Church in the USA (PCUSA). Naudé states that a recommendation was made at the 218<sup>th</sup> General Assembly (2008) that a committee be appointed to consider amending the confessional documents of the PCUSA to include Belhar in the *Book of Confessions* for that church, and Belhar would enjoy full reception in the PCUSA in 2010. In fact, the General Assembly special committee on the Belhar Confession to the 221<sup>st</sup> General Assembly (2014) of the Presbyterian Church (USA) recommends unanimously that the 221<sup>st</sup> General Assembly 2014 approve the inclusion of the Belhar Confession in the Book of Confessions, that this amendment be sent to the presbyteries for their affirmative or negative votes by June 2015, and that the 221<sup>st</sup> General Assembly adopt "The Accompanying Letter to the Confession of Belhar" from the 221<sup>st</sup> General Assembly 2014 of the PCUSA as a statement reflecting the confession, conviction, and rationale of the PCUSA based on the implications of this confession for their time and ministry. For these recommendations see, [www.pcusa.org/report-and-recommendations-to-ga-2014/pdf](http://www.pcusa.org/report-and-recommendations-to-ga-2014/pdf) [Accessed 24 April 2014].

For this history of the reception of the Belhar Confession see also M. Plaatjies-Van Huffel, [http://uir.unisa.ac.za/bistream/handle/10500/9977/Plaatjies\\_Van\\_Huffel\\_11.pdf](http://uir.unisa.ac.za/bistream/handle/10500/9977/Plaatjies_Van_Huffel_11.pdf) [Accessed 24 April 2014].



irrespective of their race and gender. The church must stand against enmity, alienation, and hatred amongst people.

It is often argued that there is no unity without reconciliation and justice. The South African theologian Ernst Conradie also makes this point in his helpful conceptual clarification of the term ‘reconciliation’ as a guiding vision for South Africa. Speaking of reconciliation, Conradie recognises the link between reconciliation and justice as articulated in articles three and four of the Belhar Confession. However, Conradie wrestles with the question whether reconciliation can indeed serve as one of the guiding visions for South Africa beyond apartheid.<sup>44</sup> He further discusses the link between reconciliation and justice by exploring the whole question of reconciliation and anticipated restitution as well as reparation and the notion of a deficit.<sup>45</sup> Conradie further argues that reconciliation is only possible if that deficit is forgiven by the victim and this is why reconciliation is costly, because it implies suffering for the victim. For him, this is why Emeritus Archbishop Desmond Tutu proclaimed that the huge gap between the haves and have-nots poses the greatest threat to reconciliation and the stability in our country.<sup>46</sup> It is evident that Tutu condemns any talk of reconciliation without considering justice for the sake of national unity and reconciliation. Reconciliation and justice are the most fundamental building blocks for true unity of the church and society.

Dirkie Smit is also of the opinion that reconciliation and justice cannot be separated; the two belong together. Smit strongly argues that true reconciliation is not possible without justice. As he puts it:

A spirit of reconciliation does not simply mean to ignore, to overlook, or even to shut our eyes to injustice and guilt. The reconciliation with God in Christ did not come about in such a way either; the justice of God led to the death of his own Son on the cross.<sup>47</sup>

Smit claims that the people who reject church unity out of fear for what it implies for the church and society in practice know the thin line between unity and justice, more than those

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<sup>44</sup> See E. Conradie, 2013. Reconciliation as one guiding vision for South Africa? Conceptual Analysis and Theological Reflection: In: *Reconciliation: A guiding vision for South Africa?* Ernst Conradie (ed.), SUN Media, Stellenbosch, 2013, 65.

<sup>45</sup> See Conradie, Reconciliation, 2013, 43-75.

<sup>46</sup> See Conradie, Reconciliation, 2013, 67-68.

<sup>47</sup> See D.J. Smit, 1984. “In a special Way the God of the Destitute, the Poor, and the Wronged” - in G. G. Cloete and D.J. Smit (eds.) *A Moment of Truth: The Confession of the Dutch Reformed Mission Church 1982*. William B. Eerdmans, Grand Rapids, 1984, 55.



who romantically advocate it.<sup>48</sup> This confirms for him that church unity is tightly connected with reconciliation and justice. It can also be mentioned that people continue to ask whether reconciliation comes before justice or justice before reconciliation. This is a burning question in our young democracy in South Africa, especially with regard to the land restitution debate.

When we speak of unity, the other two central articles of the Belhar Confession, namely, reconciliation and justice, immediately seems to come into play. The three articles of the Belhar Confession seem to have the potential to help the church to respond positively to the situation of disunity and enmity in the church and society, the pain, suffering, poverty and the cry of the most vulnerable. Belhar places God as the one who is in a special way intervening in that situation, calling God's church to be God's eyes and ears, seeing and hearing the cries of the poor and the wronged, those who are marginalised and silenced for a long time, those who were alienated from their own land.

Indeed, this also means that the call for justice in the Belhar Confession is also a call for restorative justice. In his book titled *Reconciliation: Restoring Justice*, the well-known South African theologian John de Gruchy writes about this aspect of justice by highlighting various forms of justice, including reparation as restorative justice in action. De Gruchy sees a connection between love and justice. He argues that God's justice is the justice of restored relations, an understanding of justice inseparable even if distinguishable from love, and one which finds expression in liberation from oppression and reconciliation within both personal and social relations.<sup>49</sup> Can the Belhar Confession, especially the article that deals with justice, help the church to find a way of reaching those who are marginalised and wronged, and to reach out to the poor and the most vulnerable? Although the Belhar Confession is a highly contested document, it clearly addresses the socio-ethical challenges. Belhar was born in a situation of injustice and inequality in South Africa, where reconciliation and justice was – and still is – much needed. Smit argues that everyone knows that reconciliation does not function without justice, and for that reason, an easy appeal for reconciliation, without an honest willingness to listen to the cry for justice, can be audacious. Smit points out that in the confession itself, the church's task is vividly clear; it lies on the level of discipleship that

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<sup>48</sup> See Smit, "In a special Way" 1984, 55.

<sup>49</sup> See J. de Gruchy, 2002. *Reconciliation Restoring Justice*: David Philip, Cape Town, 2002, 202.

makes the church stand up against injustice and stand by the wronged.<sup>50</sup> Any type of unity where there is no justice, harmony, and reconciliation could be disastrous and must be questioned. Unity is impossible if reconciliation and justice are not present. In this study the view of Smit will be investigated and affirmed.

In line with Smit, Nico Koopman indicates how justice in the Belhar Confession impacts, qualifies and enhances the realisation of unity and reconciliation amongst churches and in society. Koopman's emphasis lies on the fact that the emphasis on justice in the Belhar Confession points out that unity will foster the actualisation of justice in church and society, seeing as it will bring those who are wronged and those who benefit from the political and economic systems together in a redemptive space.<sup>51</sup> For Koopman, the emphasis on justice also defines reconciliation, in which this reconciliation with God the Almighty and other human beings implies a commitment to justice in the world. Koopman states that article three of the Belhar Confession adds a new dimension to the discourse of justice, as it has much significance for the unity and reconciliation in society and within churches, especially within the DR family of churches. This article on justice helps the churches to discover and confess that their continued disunity forms a stumbling block in the quest for justice.<sup>52</sup> From this analysis by Koopman, the significance of church unity for social contexts becomes visible. However, there are strong relations between what the church is and what the church does in the world. This exposition of Koopman significantly ties up with the discussion in the next chapter on *Church and World* document.

One can argue that in this lies the social significance of church unity, especially the unity amongst the DR family of churches. Unity, also structural unity, means that people come closer to each other and they start to share in learning about other's lives and stories. Furthermore, it can be added that this unity process, this solidarity, however, opens the doors for reconciliation and justice. There is much to be done about reconciliation and justice within

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<sup>50</sup> See Smit, "In a special Way" 1984, 56-59. Smit is of the opinion that God's justice does not mean that God is neutral, unconcerned, and uninvolved with regard to human misery, suffering and distress, or with regard to relationships and injustice structures, exploitation, and human beings oppression. Smit strongly claims that this God, whom people think is absent in their misery, is the God of justice precisely because God defends and protects those people without rights and those justice is not being done. This qualifies the fact that God is the Omnipresent and Omnipotent God; God is always there in the human misery and suffering, even in the life of the church and society.

<sup>51</sup> See N. Koopman, 2002. "...in a special way the God of the destitute, the poor and the wronged ..." – a basic and neglected conviction of (Reformed) Theology? In Pieter Coertzen (red): *350 Jaar Gereformeerde 1652-2002*. CLF Bloemfontein, 2002, 252-260 (252).

<sup>52</sup> See Koopman, "...in a special way" 2002, 256-257.

the ranks of the DR family of churches and South African society. I want to affirm the view that reconciliation is needed where alienation, enmity, and suspicion still exist between different races, ethnic groups, socio-economic groups, genders, sexual orientations and nationalities.

I want to further argue that the work of justice is also not complete in a society with the highest gap between rich and the poor in the world, a poverty stricken society with a high level of unemployment, and where millions of people are excluded from health care, education and other goods of the society. Smit also affirms the fact that the lack of a visible and an active unity amongst the DR family of churches is a direct stumbling block in the way of terminating injustice. Smit further argues that the separation between the congregations of the DR family of churches strongly supports the division of races. For Smit, these divisions largely accomplishes the total separation within the church of groups with differing economic standards, unequal degrees of privilege, and radical differences in education, training, and skills, as well as in the degree of participation, influence, and power in society.<sup>53</sup> In this way, justice is not in the picture. Again, the separation between ecclesiology and ethics can be clearly seen. The Belhar Confession seems to imply that this separation between ecclesiology and ethics must be challenged.

Smit strongly emphasises that in South Africa, only one type of racist society existed; one which legally established and promoted inequality, unrighteousness, and discrimination in many ways. Smit is of the opinion that in order to understand the deepest intentions behind the act of confession by the DR Mission Church (presently URCSA), it is of the utmost importance not to fail to see the connections within the draft confession and not to take seriously only the unity of the church and the reconciliation in Christ, whilst ignoring the appeal to the justice of God.<sup>54</sup> As Smit states: “On the way to effective unity the pain of unrighteousness and injustice will be exposed in a different ways.”<sup>55</sup> In this regard, he argues that unity will not be easy; there are a lot of burdens attached to unity, especially after a long period of apartheid and racism in South African society and in the church as well.

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<sup>53</sup> See Smit, “*In a special Way*” 1984, 54.

<sup>54</sup> See Smit, “*In a special Way*” 1984, 54.

<sup>55</sup> See Smit, “*In a special Way*” 1984, 55.

According to Smit, one of the basic objections against apartheid is that the alienation that it promotes actually makes reconciliation more and more impossible. The Belhar Confession asks for reconciliation, which cannot be disconnected from justice.<sup>56</sup> On the road to church unity within the DR family of churches, it is of great importance to make sure that they strive for church unity that will have positive results and impact on social contexts; and that the three articles of the Belhar Confession are properly understood and upheld. The article of justice will also be helpful for the church in its calling and vocation to discipleship, not only for the church but for the society as well. This is a crucial point for the DR family of churches, because the visible unity that this church has been called to seek cannot be achieved without considering the valuable remarks on the Belhar Confession on reconciliation and justice.

André van den Berg also alludes to this fact that the reconciliation process and liberation will bring about great pain; the pain of change, the pain of repentance, and the pain associated with the confession of guilt. However, for him, the Belhar Confession does not only call on people to change their way of thinking, but also to change and renew their church and society structures.<sup>57</sup> Van den Berg's argument is based on the three articles of the Belhar Confession and how unity, reconciliation, and justice are interconnected. In order to attain unity within the ranks of the DR family of churches, reconciliation and justice needs to be addressed. If any kind of unity takes place without attentively touching on these articles of the Belhar Confession, then that unity is at stake.

One can argue that the unity of this family will help in the renewal of the South African society and the renewal of the DR family of churches itself. After apartheid South Africa, there is a lot to be done in the church and by the church to the society in order to rectify all the injustices of the past, as well as reconciling the people of South Africa. The Belhar Confession proposes a unity that is not disconnected from reconciliation and justice. This unity might enhance the reconciliation between the members of the DR family of churches and society, whilst aiming at serving justice to all humanity. Affirming this aspect, Johan Botha highlights that the Belhar Confession clearly confess that the unity of the church is a gift from God. The church should live and keep this unity visible to the world. Botha points out that the church is called to bring about reconciliation with words and deeds. The church is

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<sup>56</sup> See Smit, *"In a special Way"* 1984, 57.

<sup>57</sup> See A. van den Berg. 1988. *Die Belhar-belydenis en die toekoms*. 1988, 9.

a peacemaker in this world, called to reconcile and be a witness of the new heaven and earth where justice prevails.<sup>58</sup> Botha further states that the church should stand where God stands, against injustice. The Belhar Confession was written because of the apartheid regime and an apartheid theology; hence the church confessed that apartheid is a sin and its justification is a heresy. The renowned South African theologian Russel Botman<sup>59</sup>, in his speech at the Presbyterian Church USA 220<sup>th</sup> General Assembly in 2012, stated that everywhere in the world we knew what was wrong with apartheid in legal, social, democratic, human rights, human dignity, demographic and political terms. Botman further argues that the one unresolved question was what its transgression in theological terms meant. Internationally, he says, people were in agreement that apartheid was a crime against humanity and we were uncertain whether this consensus meant that Christians globally could agree that apartheid represented a sin against God.<sup>60</sup>

In the apartheid regime, the theological justifications of apartheid found general acceptance. Smit notes that the true nature of and the deepest motivations for the separations in the church were not generally realised and acknowledged.<sup>61</sup> Moreover, he is also of the opinion that the people who have been torn apart by the apartheid system, the gap between rich and the poor, the privileged and the wronged, the influential and the voiceless, the powerful and the powerless, can all come closer and serve one another, but it becomes more difficult if the people are deprived of opportunities of coming closer and serving each other.<sup>62</sup> Unity serves reconciliation and justice because it brings people closer. Smit argues strongly in favour of church unity. He argues that the church denies unrighteousness in society because of the pain of social poverty, with all its devastating results, and that burden can be offloaded before

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<sup>58</sup> See Johan Botha, 1998. Belhar, 'n Staf om vandag en môre mee te gaan: In Johan Botha and Piet Naudé, *Op pad met Belhar. Goeie nuus vir gister, vandag en môre*. J.L. van Schaik, Pretoria. 1998, 50-51. Johan Botha also affirms that unity, reconciliation and justice go together, they cannot be separated. The one does not work in the absence of the other. The visible living unity of the church brings about real reconciliation and caring justice. See Johan Botha, Belhar, 'n Staf om vandag en môre mee te gaan, 1998, 55.

<sup>59</sup> The URCSA, the WCRC, the WCC and many other structures are still mourning the sudden death of Professor Russel Botman, who passed away in his sleep at his home on the 28 June 2014. With his theological knowledge and passion for church unity and the role of the church on reconciliation and justice in church and society, Botman was a source of inspiration in this regard. His involvement in the process that led to the drafting of the Belhar Confession remains one of his biggest contributions within the URCSA and ecumenically.

<sup>60</sup> See H.R. Botman, Witnessing the work of the Holy Spirit in Belhar:

[http://oga.pcusa/media/uploads/oga/h\\_russel\\_botman\\_witnessing\\_the\\_work\\_of\\_the\\_holy\\_spirit\\_with\\_bio.pdf](http://oga.pcusa/media/uploads/oga/h_russel_botman_witnessing_the_work_of_the_holy_spirit_with_bio.pdf)

[Accessed 24 April 2014].

<sup>61</sup> See Smit, "In a special Way" 1984, 55.

<sup>62</sup> See Smit, "In a special Way" 1984, 55.

God.<sup>63</sup> The social significance of church unity throbs here, when we start to learn and share with one another, when we close the gap between rich and the poor.

The unity of the church will never have any impact in societal renewal if justice and reconciliation are not present, especially after a long period of struggle against apartheid in South Africa. A spirit of reconciliation does not mean that we should ignore or close our eyes to injustices. The reconciliation with God in Christ did not come about in such a way either, the justice of God led to the death of his own Son on the cross, Smit says.<sup>64</sup> The reconciliation and justice that led to Christ's death was very costly. Visible unity, however, is an obligation and responsibility for the church. The purpose of the Belhar Confession could be understood as a call for societal renewal. Against the background of apartheid theology, which made South Africans suffer, the Belhar Confession calls for unity that cannot be found without appealing for reconciliation and justice.

In order to achieve church unity, we must consider the very specific calling of the church in this world. It is against this understanding of the church's responsibility that the Belhar Confession wishes to confess that the church is being called by God to follow God in this. The climax of the matter is revealed here, the heart of the church. The social significance of church unity correlates with the responsibility of the church; serving reconciliation and justice in the renewal of the society. A detailed analysis of this debate on the relationship between unity and the notions of reconciliation and justice will shed much light on the question about the social significance of church unity.

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<sup>63</sup> See Smit, *"In a special Way"* 1984, 55. Dirkie Smit argued convincingly the fact that, for those who do believe in visible unity, however, a difficult challenge remains, namely, to get some form of clarity on the nature of this unity they seek. In his opinion, the vision, model, form, and nature of this visible unity is itself deeply controversial, difficult to understand, very complicated, even amongst those who agree that they are called to this unity. On the URCSA's perspective, Smit brings forward the importance of the Belhar Confession around the discussion regarding the visible unity that we are called to seek. He pointed out that *firstly*, the Belhar Confession clearly states that this unity must be visible, people must live this unity, and *secondly*, the people should strive for real reconciliation and compassionate justice. The Belhar Confession states that there can be no visible unity without real reconciliation and compassionate justice. See Smit, *Unity in church and society?* 2007, 282-283.

<sup>64</sup> See Smit, *"In a special Way"* 1984, 55. Smit continues his argument saying that the Christian attitude of reconciliation, which means among other things, honest soul-searching and self-criticism, repentance and confession of guilt, a willingness to forgive and to be converted, tolerance, understanding, patience, and love, surely is present, he furthers, but this attitude must not be confused with the willingness to be lightly satisfied with that which is viewed as sinful and unjust. See Smit, *"In a special Way"* 1984, 57.

## 1.5. Research questions and hypothesis

Against the background of the ecumenical debates or discourses discussed above, the main research question of this study can be phrased as follows: What does church unity mean for social contexts?

This main research question opens space to address further questions such as: What is the significance of church unity for societal renewal and for the church's witness in this regard? Can church unity help to challenge the moral decay in society? Can church unity be a powerful source to influence morally good citizenship?

These questions are especially pertinent to the South African situation, particularly with reference to the DR family of churches after the collapse of apartheid. What is the social significance of the possible reunification of the DR family of churches? What is the social significance of the absence of such reunification? In short: How can we challenge the separation of ecclesiology and ethics, and make church unity speak to social contexts in a fruitful way?

These questions resonate with the significant questions asked by Dirkie Smit, in his article titled *Unity in church and society? – Theological reflections on an ongoing challenge in South Africa today*, where he points out that the question mark of the title implies: Is unity necessary in church and society? Is unity possible in church and society? For Smit, the word “ongoing” seems to suggest that there might have been a time when unity presented a real challenge in the church and society and when unity was regarded by some as possible. Smit further asks whether the unity in church and society still present us with a challenge or whether it is still necessary and possible.<sup>65</sup> Smit's assumption is that many, if not most people inside the church and also in society, would see unity as unnecessary and impossible today, and their answer would reject unity. In this article, Smit states that unity is not an ongoing challenge; rather, it is still the same challenge that we faced a decade and more ago. The reality is that the debate has changed and the supporters and opponents have changed.<sup>66</sup> The questions posed by Smit in his article relate to the essence of this study on church unity and

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<sup>65</sup> See D.J. Smit, 2007. *Unity in church and society? – Theological reflections on an ongoing challenge in South Africa today*: In *Essays in Public Theology. Collected Essays 1, Study Guides in Religion and Theology 12*, edited by Ernst M. Conradie, Sun Press, Stellenbosch, 2007, 275.

<sup>66</sup> See Smit, *Unity in church and society?* 2007, 276.



social contexts. A positive answer to the questions does not only give a rationale for unity initiatives, but also energises people to embody unity through their witness.

The claim of this study is that the unity of the church cannot be separated from the church's advocacy for peace, justice and reconciliation. It will be argued that the debate on the Belhar Confession too points to the significance of this conviction. The Belhar debate implies the link between church unity and social contexts, between the *koinonia* and *martyria* (witness) of the church. But how should we understand this? The study is interested to explore this further, and to indicate the theological motifs that have played a role in this regard and to point to further motifs that have the promise to enhance even further the discourse on the interconnection between ecclesiology and ethics.

The hypothesis of this study is that church unity is highly significant for social contexts and societal renewal. Hence the discourse around the unity of the church cannot be disconnected from the discourse on reconciliation and justice. It will be argued that the discourse of the WCC on *Costly Unity*, *Costly Commitment*, and *Costly Obedience* resonates well with the URCSA Belhar Confession's emphasis on costly unity, costly reconciliation and costly justice. These two discourses have the potential to be mutually enriching, thus to strengthen the broader ecumenical discourse on church unity and social contexts. In the process various key theological notions enhance this discourse.

## 1.6. Methodology

This investigation will be carried out by means of a literature study. Literature that deals with the following themes will be investigated:

- (a) The social significance of unity as articulated in the ecclesiology and ethics debate of the World Council of Churches as the heart of this study.<sup>67</sup>

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<sup>67</sup> The study will be carried out on the literature of the World Council of Churches. The main sources that will be used are: *Church and World: The Unity of the Church and the Renewal of Human Community - A Faith and Order Study Document*, Faith and Order Paper No. 151, 1990 – WCC, Geneva. This study reveals that unity, witness and service of the church are fundamental for the renewal of the human community that is crying out for renewal. The visible unity of the church is emphasised here. *Towards Koinonia in Faith, Life and Witness: A discussion paper*, April 1993 - Faith and Order Paper No. 161, WCC, Geneva. In this discussion paper the unity that the WCC strives for is brought under the vision of koinonia in faith, life and witness and these cannot be separated. *Ecclesiology and Ethics: Ecumenical Ethical Engagement, Moral Formation and the Nature of the Church*, by T. F. Best and M. Robra, (eds.) WCC, Geneva, 1997. The ecclesiology and ethics study forms the heart of this study, where Faith and Order and Life and Work Commissions of the work of the WCC combined their work in realising that there is no church without ethics and no ethics without the church. The three



(b) The relationship between unity, reconciliation, and justice in the Confession of Belhar (1982, 1986).<sup>68</sup>

(c) The challenge towards visible church unity and witness within the DR family of churches.<sup>69</sup>

The impact of unity on reconciliation and justice in society will not be only investigated through a focus on the work that has been written on the three articles of the Belhar Confession. The World Council of Churches (WCC) endeavours to reconcile the agendas of Faith and Order (which focuses on church unity) and Life and Work (which focuses on social ethical issues) departments of the WCC, which has lasted for more than a decade. This study process, which was carried out under the theme of the ecclesiology and ethics debate, will also be discussed. It brought to the fore various consultations, discussion documents, books and articles,<sup>70</sup> and further culminated in three consultations under the themes *Costly Unity*, *Costly Commitment* and *Costly Obedience*. It sought to explore the link between what the church is and what the church does in society.

The WCC also explored the ethical dimension, not as a separate department of the church's life, but as integrally related to its worship, its confession of faith and its witness as service in the world. However, by linking the nature and unity of the church with the churches' common calling to ethical reflection and action, it aimed at healing the divisions between the Faith and Order and the Life and Work movements. By investigating this debate in the WCC, I hope it

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consultations on costly unity, costly commitment and costly obedience are vital in this regard. Amongst other theologians, the work done by D. J. Smit in his article: "Living Unity? On the Ecumenical Movement and Globalisation": *Scriptura* 84, 2003:3. P. Lodberg, 1995. "The history of ecumenical work on ecclesiology and ethics". *Ecumenical Review*, Volume 47: No.2. April. S. H. Moore, 1995. "Towards koinonia in Faith, Life and Witness: Theological insights and emphases from the fifth world conference on Faith and Order", Santiago de Compostela 1993. *Ecumenical Review*, Volume 47, 1995. D. Forrester, 1997. *The true church and morality: Reflections on Ecclesiology and Ethics*. WCC, Geneva. L.S. Mudge, 1998. *The church as moral community: Ecclesiology and Ethics in current ecumenical debate*. WCC, Geneva, will be consulted.

<sup>68</sup> For the South African debate on the Belhar Confession, the book of D.G. Cloete, and D. J. Smit, (eds.) 1984. *A Moment of Truth: The Confession of the Dutch Reformed Mission Church 1982*, William B. Eerdmans, Grand Rapids, will be used a guide throughout this study, especially the three articles on the Belhar Confession by D. J. Smit. The recent book by P. Naudé titled, *Neither Calendar nor Clock: Perspectives on the Belhar Confession*, William B. Eerdmans, Grand Rapids, 2010 will also shed some light on the Belhar Confession debate. I will also make use of the book by J. Botha and P. Naudé, 2011. *Good News to Confess: The Belhar Confession and the road of acceptance*, Bible Media, Wellington, 2011.

<sup>69</sup> I will look at the work of the South African Reformed ecclesologist P. Coertzen on church unity processes since the early 1990s, especially his article titled: "The road of unity in the family of Dutch Reformed Churches in South Africa since 1994: A Dutch Reformed Perspective" in *Scriptura* 2003:2. The work of D.J. Smit with regard to church unity of the DRC Family, especially his article: "Unity in church and society? Theological reflections on an ongoing challenge in South Africa" in *Scriptura* 2003:2 will also be utilised. This will include the work of the other theologians who wrote on the same theme of church unity. For further information, see the bibliography.

<sup>70</sup> See T. F. Best, 1995. "Introduction to the papers from the meeting on Ecclesiology and Ethics": Jerusalem, November 1994. *The ecumenical Review* Volume 47, No. 2 April 1995.

will shed light on the question about the impact of unity on reconciliation and justice with regard to the South African situation. In fact, the WCC debate will constitute the heart of this study. The study takes serious the task of engaging with the official documents and conference reports of the WCC on the theme to be investigated.<sup>71</sup> Relevant secondary literature will also be used to describe the significance of especially the Ecclesiology and Ethics debate for the unification process of the DR family of churches.

## 1.7. Research Design

The study looks at the various WCC world conferences held in trying to heal the divisions between Faith and Order and Life and Work movements. These world conferences and consultations played a major role in finding a way of connecting the Faith and Order and the Life and Work commissions of the WCC. The contributions from the WCC conferences and consultations are discussed in chapters two, three and four of this study. The South African discourse on the Belhar Confession on church unity, reconciliation and justice in the South African context is discussed in chapters five, six and seven of this study.

Chapter One gives an overview and background on the discourses on Ecclesiology and Ethics and the Belhar Confession, and deals with aspects related to research questions, hypothesis, methodology and the research design of the study.

Chapter Two will focus on the discussion of the *Church and World* study document of the WCC looking on the questions of the unity of the church and the renewal of human community. The *Church and World* study document puts emphasis on the significance of the link between church unity and the church's witness and service in the world.

Chapter Three will focus on the discussion paper of the Faith and Order on *Koinonia in Faith, Life and Witness*, which paved the way for the Santiago de Compostela consultation in 1993. In this chapter I will introduce the role that *koinonia* played in putting forward some ways of bringing ecclesiology and ethics discussions together.

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<sup>71</sup> See the footnotes under the methodology of this study for some of these official documents and conference reports to be utilised in this dissertation.

Chapter Four will focus on the three WCC's consultations on *Costly Unity*, *Costly Commitment*, and *Costly Obedience* between 1993 and 1996. These consultations were an attempt to bring ecclesiology and ethics together in a fruitful way.

Chapter Five will focus on the unity of the church and the reality of division in South Africa. Here I will focus more on the South African context on how the church unity endeavours within the DR family of churches circles suffered because of inequality, race division and apartheid. This is important because discussion on church unity does not occur in an historical vacuum.

Chapter Six will focus on the events leading to the Belhar Confession, as well as the purpose and the structure of this confession.

Chapter Seven will focus on the three significant articles of the Belhar Confession that deals with ecclesiology (unity) and reconciliation and ethics (justice) respectively. These three articles will be discussed in a form that has as its headings "Costly Unity", "Costly Reconciliation" and "Costly Justice". This indicates the proposed resonance with the WCC debate on Ecclesiology and Ethics, especially the focus on *Costly Unity*, *Costly Commitment* and *Costly Obedience*.

Chapter Eight will offer some concluding remarks on church unity and its possible significance for social contexts.

## **Part I: The Ecclesiology and Ethics Debate of the World Council of Churches**

### **Chapter 2**

#### **The Unity of the Church and the Renewal of Human Community**

##### **2.1. Introduction**

This chapter discusses the efforts of the World Council of Churches (WCC) in trying to reconcile the Faith and Order and Life and Work movements through the *Church and World* study on the unity of the church and the renewal of human community. For decades there were separate debates on church unity by the Faith and Order commission and separate debates on ethical issues by the Life and Work commission of the WCC. The *Church and World* study document attempts to explore the significance of church unity in relation to its witness and service in the world. The struggle for church unity and the efforts to achieve this unity by the WCC became an extremely important focus point on its ecumenical programme. I think what adds more value and weight to this debate and endeavours for church unity is the fact that the focus was not only on church unity as the only important agenda point, but the witness and the service of the church in the world was also highly important on its agenda.<sup>1</sup>

It is very important to look at how *Church and World* addresses the relationship between the unity of the church and its call to witness and service in the world, which is mainly the ethical dimension of the church. The framework of *Church and World* will be employed in this chapter in order to see the flow of the argument on how ecclesiology relates to ethics. It must be noted that *Church and World* was used as a guiding document for the Faith and Order World Conference in 1993 at Santiago de Compostela. This chapter will discuss the background and the goal of *Church and World* study document as a means of bringing church and ethics together. This will be done by looking on the unity and renewal of the church in the light of the kingdom. Two significant concepts that define the church, namely that of the church as mystery and the church as prophetic sign, will also be discussed in more detail. In relating ecclesiology and ethics, two significant ethical themes will be discussed in *Church*

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<sup>1</sup> See, *Church and World: The Unity of the Church and the Renewal of Human Community. A Faith and Order Study Document* - Faith and Order Paper No. 151. 1990 – Geneva, WCC, 1990, vii.

*and World*, namely, unity and renewal and the search for justice, as well as the community of women and men. According to the *Church and World* study document, church unity would mean nothing in the world without a common Christian witness and service in the world.<sup>2</sup> From this perspective of *Church and World*, I want to introduce and explore the significance of church for social contexts as a theme of this study. With regard to *Church and World* it seems that church unity must flow from the church to influence the life in society. Some questions about the nature of this unity and how it functions in a divided society in terms of religion, race, class, gender, and language, become very interesting in this regard. In other words, the church's involvement in the world is highly important, simply because the church is called to serve in the world. This process has to do with the renewal of human community. *Church and World* explores the human situation in the world and realises that this is not for sake of the church alone, but also for the world in which the church is called to serve. *Church and World* helps us to understand the role of the church in relation to ethics and raise many issues that relate the church to ethics. There is a rich history that led to the development of the *Church and World* study document in an attempt to bring ecclesiology and ethics together in a fruitful way.

## **2.2. Introducing the *Church and World* study document**

Peter Lodberg notes that at Uppsala in 1968, the insights from the two studies on *God in Nature and History* and *Significance of the Councils of the Early Church for the Ecumenical Movement* come together in the section under the heading *The Holy spirit and the Catholicity of the Church*, where catholicity was interpreted pneumatologically as a dynamic term that is qualitatively defined from the task of the church as a reconciling community in the world. Lodberg further explains that the church is sent to the world in the Holy Spirit, where it becomes a renewed and a renewing community.<sup>3</sup> One of the fundamental arguments of Uppsala was based on the emphasis of the church as a sign of kingdom. In addition, a recommendation was made in Uppsala that more work must be done on the relationship between the unity of the church and the unity of humankind, Faith and Order took this seriously in dealing with the interaction between ecclesiology and ethics.

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<sup>2</sup> See *Church and World*, 1990, 4-5.

<sup>3</sup> See P. Lodberg 1995. "The History of Ecumenical Work on the Ecclesiology and Ethics": *Ecumenical Review* Volume 47: No. 2. April 1995, 130.

As mentioned earlier in the introductory chapter, Dirkie Smit observes, in his article *Living Unity? On the Ecumenical Movement and Globalisation*, that there have been a lot of shifts and changes about the nature of the unity of the church on an ecumenical level. Smit also raises the fact that the Faith and Order Commission of the WCC understood that the efforts towards achieving the unity of the church and efforts towards common witness and service in the world should be held together without separation. This fundamental insight was the result of the work done in *The Unity of the Church – the Unity of Humankind*<sup>4</sup> and *The Community of Women and Men in the Church* studies.<sup>5</sup> According to Lodberg more work was done on the church as a sign in the former study, and the conclusion was drawn that the church as a sign constantly needs to be made visible.<sup>6</sup>

As a result of this fundamental idea and agenda of the WCC on church unification, the Commission on Faith and Order of the WCC took up this challenge and initiated a study programme on *The Unity of the Church and the Renewal of Human Community*. This study programme was initiated at the meeting of the Commission on Faith and Order in Lima, Peru in 1982. It was then affirmed by the WCC Sixth Assembly in Vancouver in 1983, with the emphasis that it should work in accordance with the general orientation of Faith and Order with an ecclesiological focus, making a theological exploration of the church as ‘sign’ a central part of this programme. The aim of this study was to focus on unity that is functional and visible. This study also seeks to find the social implications of church unity towards a human community that cries out for renewal and transformation. This relates to the theme of the dissertation and the questions posed in the introductory chapter with relation to the significance of church unity for social contexts.

Following this meeting, several other international consultations occurred in many countries with a specific focus on unity and renewal.<sup>7</sup> Between the years 1984 -1989, the process on unity and renewal was pursued. In March 1989 in Leuenberg, Switzerland, the first version of the text was produced and later carefully reviewed in August 1989 by the Faith and Order’s Plenary Commission in Budapest, and revised in Mandeville, Jamaica, in January 1990.<sup>8</sup> The

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<sup>4</sup> See the work of B. Hoedemaker, 1998. “The Unity of Humankind: Problems and promises of an indispensable Ecumenical Theme”, *Ecumenical Review* Volume 50, No. 3, July 1998, 307-314.

<sup>5</sup> See D. J. Smit, 2003:3 “Living Unity? On the Ecumenical Movement and Globalisation”: *Scriptura* 84. 2003:3, 425. See also *Church and World*, 1990, 5.

<sup>6</sup> See Lodberg, “The History of Ecumenical Work”, 1995, 131.

<sup>7</sup> See *Church and World*, 1990, vii.

<sup>8</sup> See *Church and World*, 1990, vii.

*Church and World* study document text was eventually approved for publication at the meeting of the Faith and Order Steering Commission in Dublanc, Scotland in August 1990.<sup>9</sup> This text of the study group was published, distributed and circulated to be studied by the churches. It must be noted that *Church and World* reflects on different contributions from different theological perspectives and cultural backgrounds. However, various contributors who came from different social and theological backgrounds and also worked hard on this study document eventually struggled to find what can be said together in the present about God's call to the churches in seeking unity, and – at the same time – to be signs and instruments of the renewal of the human community.<sup>10</sup> From Faith and Order's perspective then, the reflection from the churches in response to this study document would play a significant role in preparation for the Faith and Order World Conference of 1993. It therefore became evident that the challenge of the church is its calling to unity and renewal, as well as its mission and calling to be God's instrument in efforts for the renewal of human community. The church must be a visible sign of God's kingdom.

### **2.3. Towards a Christian response in today's world**

*Church and World* affirms that today's world with all its diversities is marked by opportunities and dangers, hopes and anxieties. In addition, many of these are local and related to particular areas and issues, whilst others are more global in their scope and implications.<sup>11</sup> On the one hand, the scope of the human situation referred to in *Church and World* reveals rather a gloomy situation, whilst on the other hand some hopeful dimensions are also recognised, especially with regard to growing commitments to peace and human rights and even to economic development. It can be argued that although we see these positive contributions in the world, they are not enough, especially when we are looking at the elephantine growing gap between the rich and poor. This becomes a serious concern for justice, especially economic justice in different social contexts.

*Church and World* underscores that there is a deep yearning for meaning, for justice, peace, and the preservation of the resources of life shared by millions of people and which is echoed by the yearnings of all creatures. As *Church and World* puts it: "There is a pain of hunger and

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<sup>9</sup> See *Church and World*, 1990, vii-viii. The preface of the study document gives an outline that resulted in the publication of this text. It is the result of seven consultations that took place around the globe including Africa.

<sup>10</sup> See *Church and World*, 1990, vii-viii.

<sup>11</sup> See *Church and World*, 1990, 1.



broken hopes, the suffering of those whose human rights are violated, of the victims of racism and sexism, of the exploited and the oppressed and poor.”<sup>12</sup> Perhaps many people seek the church’s involvement and response to these situations. At the outset it can be noted that *Church and World*’s concern is more on the ethical dimension of the church and its involvement in the renewal of human community. How can church unity be helpful in these situations? The issues raised by *Church and World* relates to the focus of this study on the role that church unity can play in social contexts.

Looking at the challenges in the world today, the following question arises: what can be done to restore reconciliation, justice, peace and unity in the world? Or expressed theologically: what is God busy doing regarding the human situation today in this world? What is God’s role and that of the church in all the challenges we are facing? How does the human community understand God as the loving Father and the caring God in the situation of misery and despair in which people find themselves? What hope and relief does the church bring to renew, repair, and to reconstruct the situation? According to *Church and World*, Christians and churches live in the world, in the midst of these anxieties and hopes. They share in them and are challenged by them, whilst at the same time they are not “of” the world, viewing it always from the unique, life-giving perspective of the Gospel.<sup>13</sup> A similar point is made by the Dutch theologian Abraham van de Beek in his article, titled *Jesus and the Church as Vulnerable Strangers*, when he describes Christ and his Church as strangers in this world. He states that strangers are extremely vulnerable and they do not fit into the customs and ideas of indigenous people. Van de Beek argues that because the being of Jesus in the world is the identity of a stranger, his followers participate in his fate. Seeing as Christians belong to Jesus, they are strangers too. Furthermore, given that they refuse to adjust to the world, they remain strangers and thus, are rejected by the world.<sup>14</sup>

*Church and World* underscores that Christians are part and parcel of these anxieties and hopes, including all the challenges that the world is facing. In this regard, *Church and World* states that church members will not be separated from the rest of humanity, seeing as they are related to humanity in a deeper way and committed to humanity even more strongly. When God calls together the church from the human race, the idea is that God wills the church to be

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<sup>12</sup> See *Church and World*, 1990, 1.

<sup>13</sup> See *Church and World*, 1990, 1-2.

<sup>14</sup> See A. van de Beek, 2008. “Jesus and the Church as vulnerable strangers”: In: Eddy Van der Borgh (ed.) *Journal of Reformed Theology* 2, Volume 2. No.3, 255-257.



a sign of the reconciliation of human beings to God and to one another.<sup>15</sup> Van de Beek alludes to this when he states that the whole world is submitted to the will of God, and justice, peace, and love will reign.<sup>16</sup> *Church and World* again explores the relationship between ecclesiology and ethics and how church unity can contribute positively towards society. This is the key question of this study. In this regard one can argue that the church cannot be the church if it is not involved on ethical issues of life and death in the community of women and men. One can imagine the danger in church and society where ethical issues are not a matter of concern. It becomes evident in *Church and World* that the church must give a moral guidance in society. The church becomes the foretaste of the anticipated kingdom where unity, peace, reconciliation and justice prevails.

*Church and World* reckons that the church is called and sent to strive for unity, life and renewal in a world marked by sin, suffering and death. The differences that divide the churches also hinder their common faith, witness and service. *Church and World* strongly argues that the church itself cannot deny its own nature and calling to be a prophetic sign for the world.<sup>17</sup> The church proclaims the victorious Christ over death and that human divisions may be overcome and reconciliation achieved in Christ; in the celebration of the Eucharist, the church challenges all forms of injustice.<sup>18</sup> Here, the role of the Eucharist as unifying factor cannot be underestimated. In the Eucharist celebration, the church must strive to address all issues that divide one person from the other, as previously mentioned. This perspective of *Church and World* seems to also address the DRC stance in 1857 when this church opted for the separate worship (and celebration of the Holy Communion) “due to the weakness of some”.<sup>19</sup>

*Church and World* also take cognisance of the fact that Christians and churches are also marked by differences and have different understandings of the nature, identity and boundaries of the church. This led to a different understanding of partaking in social issues and became a serious issue and a tool that keep many Christians and churches apart from each other.<sup>20</sup> The results of these differences kept Christians and churches apart so much that it also

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<sup>15</sup> See *Church and World*, 1990, 23-32.

<sup>16</sup> See A. van de Beek, “Jesus and the Church as vulnerable strangers”: 2008, 262.

<sup>17</sup> See *Church and World*, 1990, 2.

<sup>18</sup> See *Church and World*, 1990, 2.

<sup>19</sup> This whole scenario will be discussed in chapter six as this has raised a great concern for the unity of the church and the church’s engagement on ethical issues.

<sup>20</sup> See *Church and World*, 1990, 2.

hobbled their common proclamation, witness and service in the world. It must be noted that this remains a challenge in ecumenism and churches takes different stands on certain ethical issues.

*Church and World* convincingly argues that in its response towards its divine mandate, the church must strive, through the power of the Holy Spirit, to struggle within its own historical life against all marks of brokenness, division and injustice – oppressive structures, abuses of power, discrimination based on race, sex or caste, excessive individualism and all that divides Christians from one another.<sup>21</sup> This proposed church response towards injustice, division and discrimination by *Church and World* does engage the discourse of the Belhar Confession, especially with regard to the role of the church regarding justice. The Belhar Confession's emphasis on justice will be dealt with in more detail in chapters six and seven of this study. However, in the Belhar Confession, the article on justice cannot be separated from the article on reconciliation.

With regard to the aforementioned challenges on the response of the church by *Church and World*, a question can be asked: Is this not a difficult task for the church to be engaged in, especially in democratic countries like South Africa where those who have power use their wealth to gain justice? How can the church penetrate and address the misuse of power by those who hide it over their tradition and culture? Can the church address these challenges alone? *Church and World* reckons that this struggle is not for the sake of the church alone, but it is in and for the world that God calls the church that it may be a sign and bearer of God's work towards the salvation and renewal of all humankind.<sup>22</sup> In partaking in this struggle, the church is understood as a mystery and prophetic sign pointing to the kingdom of God. In addressing these issues, the church takes a first step towards the goal of reaching an authentic unity of the church, witnessing to the truth of the gospel of Jesus Christ and serving in a world marked by sin.

## **2.4. The goal and development of the *Church and World* study document**

*Church and World* states that the aim of the study on the unity of the church and the renewal of human community was to focus on the visible unity of the church and the search for

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<sup>21</sup> See *Church and World*, 1990, 3.

<sup>22</sup> See *Church and World*, 1990, 3.

common Christian witness and service in the world crying out for renewal.<sup>23</sup> These two ecumenical tasks are closely connected to one another; visible unity cannot function properly if it is not practised. Dirkie Smit alludes to this fact when arguing that the purpose of the *Church and World* study document is therefore to affirm and explore this inter-relation of two fundamental ecumenical tasks; the search for the visible unity of Christ's church, which is very costly, and the search for common Christian proclamation, witness and service as expressions of God's mission and love for a world crying out for renewal.<sup>24</sup>

I concur with Smit's argument that the church is called to become what it is; a holy, reconciled and reconciling community. This remark of the church as a reconciling community, which is also emphasised by *Church and World*, is in line with the Belhar Confession's affirmation of the church as peacemaker, especially the article on the ministry of reconciliation.<sup>25</sup> The Belhar Confession reads:

We believe that God has entrusted the church with the message of reconciliation in and through Jesus Christ; that the church is called to be the salt of the earth and the light of the world, that the church is called blessed because it is a peacemaker, that the church is witness both by word and by deed to the new heaven and the new earth in which righteousness dwells.<sup>26</sup>

For Smit, the church knows that this striving is not for the sake of the church alone, but it is in and for the world that God calls the church. In this regard the task of the church, as well as its identity, is understood from the point of view of God's kingdom as both a mystery and a prophetic sign. Smit underscores that ecclesial unity would sometimes be regarded as necessary for practical reasons, to make the collective endeavours of the church stronger in the face of social, political, and economic challenges they were facing. In order for the world to see this unity, it must be visible; it must be witnessed and practised. The major concern was the work of the church in the world as a social ethic, a *koinonia* ethic.<sup>27</sup>

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<sup>23</sup> See *Church and World*, 1990, 3-4.

<sup>24</sup> See Smit, *Living Unity?* 2003:3, 425-426. See also *Church and World*, 1990, 3-4.

<sup>25</sup> See J. Botha and P. Naudé, 2011. "The Belhar Confession (1986)": in Johan Botha and Piet Naudé: *Good News to Confess: The Belhar Confession and the road of acceptance*, Bible Media, Wellington, 21.

<sup>26</sup> See J. Botha and P. Naudé, "The Belhar Confession (1986)", 2011, 21.

<sup>27</sup> In his article "Living Unity? On the Ecumenical Movement and Globalisation", Dirkie Smit gives a short analysis towards the development of the notion of *koinonia* that grew among churches attending the Life and Work consultations. This could be traced down during the Seoul meeting of the Life and Work tradition in 1990, where churches declared "conciliar process" and "covenant" ecclesologically significant and that together they demonstrate the intention of committing the churches in a unified manner to confront the life and death issues of the time.

*Church and World* clearly states that there is a strong relationship and inter-relation between the two issues; the search for unity and the search for renewal. The goal of the study document relates to certain fundamental ecclesiological questions asked, such as: How can the church be understood in such a way that the nature of the church and the mission of the church are seen as integral and inter-related elements of the being (the *esse*) of the church itself? How can this inter-relation between the church, thus conceived, and humanity “outside” the church be understood beyond their obvious relation, knowing that the church lives in this world and sent to it?<sup>28</sup> In an endeavour to develop a theological understanding of the inter-relation between the church and humanity, two sets of issues were discussed in *Church and World*, namely, the concerns for justice and the concern for an authentic community of women and men. This attempt to reflect on these concerns was an attempt to bring the Faith and Order and Life and Work commissions together in a fruitful way.

With regard to the development of the *Church and World* study document, the following theological and ecclesiological themes were helpful in reflecting on the nature and unity of the church in relation to its calling in the world:

- The kingdom of God, in light of the biblical vision of the creative, redeeming and sustaining rule of God;
- The church as mystery, with its emphasis upon the reality of the church as divine body of Christ;
- The church as prophetic sign, with its emphasis upon the church as instrument of God’s grace given to a world crying out for healing and renewal;
- An overarching eschatological and doxological affirmation, which places all human reflection and action in the perspective of the certain final realisation of God’s saving purpose for all humankind.<sup>29</sup>

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Smit argues that during the last decade voices grew stronger from both sides stating that conciliar process and covenant belong together and that the tension between the struggles for unity and justice should be overcome. During the Canberra Assembly in 1991, the so-called Canberra Statement already made use of the notion of *koinonia* in broadening the context of the unity of the Church. Smit also further relates to the Fifth World Conference of Faith and Order in Santiago in 1993 that made use of the Canberra Statement as the building block in developing the idea of visible unity of the Church, the notion of *koinonia* was used and an official report was therefore published under the theme: *On the way to Fuller Koinonia*. See Smit, *Living Unity?* 2003:3, 426-427.

<sup>28</sup> See *Church and World*, 1990, 4.

<sup>29</sup> See *Church and World*, 1990, 6.

The second and third elements of the study document are two areas that have been chosen to exemplify the inter-relation between church and humanity in the perspective of specific issues of unity and renewal as discussed earlier. The second element is a reflection upon the ecclesiological implications of the church's involvement in issues of justice, whilst the third element reflects upon the ecclesiological significance of the search for a more complete and authentic community of women and men. The second and the third elements of *Church and World* relate to the reflection of the church on ethics. The fourth element dealt with the process of reflection in local groups around the world with the intention of helping Faith and Order to listen to insights and experiences from local congregations.<sup>30</sup>

It must be noted that the unity and renewal study document of the WCC depended both upon theological reflection on the church as a mystery and prophetic sign and upon theological reflection on the contextual study of the implications of the concerns for justice and for the community of women and men for the understanding of the church and its unity.<sup>31</sup> *Church and World* underscores that these reflections challenge the churches to see and affirm that the visible unity of the church must have implications in the broader broken human community. It can be argued that this visible unity of the church brings a challenge for uniting, renewing and transforming the suffering human community that faces different challenges in the world. It is evident in the *Church and World* study document that the unity and renewal of the church is understood in the light of God's kingdom.

## 2.5. Unity, renewal and the kingdom

*Church and World* explores the interrelation between unity and renewal and that both are applicable to the church and to human community in their particular ways. *Church and World* also notes that to delineate the inter-relation of unity and renewal to church and human community, the perspective of the kingdom is fundamental.<sup>32</sup> Three important issues are explored in this regard, namely, the announcement of the kingdom, the response to the kingdom and the promise of life that comes with the kingdom.

Firstly, with regard to the announcement of the kingdom, *Church and World* argues that the emphasis on the theme of God as the eschatological king and judge flourished during the time

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<sup>30</sup> See *Church and World*, 1990, 6-7.

<sup>31</sup> See *Church and World*, 1990, 7.

<sup>32</sup> See *Church and World*, 1990, 12.

that Israel was under the rule of their enemies. The prophets gave an impression of the day of the Lord as a day of wrath and retribution against injustice and immorality when Israel disobeyed God's commands (Isa. 2:12-21, 61:2).<sup>33</sup> However, *Church and World* emphasises that God's concern is not merely wrath and retribution as his goal for judgement, but God's judgement is rather meant to establish again and anew righteousness and justice, to establish God's kingdom before the eyes of Israel and the whole world. A question can be asked by those who suffer injustices today. When is this restoration of justice and righteousness coming? Additionally, seeing as people continue to suffer injustices in this world, should we keep waiting for this day to come? What does this new justice and righteousness mean for those who suffer injustice and unrighteousness for so long? Can church unity bring about social justice and righteousness in social contexts? And in the South African context: How can this restoration of justice take place after the collapse of apartheid? It can be argued that the question of the restoration of justice for any social context cannot be understood fully without understanding God's notion of justice.

*Church and World* argues that God will establish a new covenant between God and God's people; a covenant that will engage all the nations. As the study document puts it:

A new covenant between God and the people will be accomplished (Jer. 31:31-34), a covenant which will affect all the nations of the world (Isa. 11:9, 56:7). A restored community will come into being and peace, justice and harmony will be experienced (Isa. 25:8, 32:17; Jer. 23:6; Ezek. 34:25; Hos. 2:20-23).<sup>34</sup>

This simply implies that all the things that were twisted will go back to normal. Central to this idea of the kingdom of God, there are two fundamental things about Christ's life and ministry; his prophetic message and his mighty acts. *Church and World* underscores that the presupposition of his teaching and healing is that in Mark 1:15: "The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God is at hand; repent and believe in the gospel."<sup>35</sup>

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<sup>33</sup> See *Church and World*, 1990, 12.

<sup>34</sup> See *Church and World*, 1990, 13. The suffering human community is waiting and calling in prayers for Jesus to come and judge. The longing for peace, justice and harmony grew as their eyes filled with tears as a result of the pain inflicted on them, not only in their bodies, but also the pain inside them. At times the prayer, "Come Lord Jesus Come" is heard when the community of women and men experienced a gruesome suffering and pain; it is a prayer for relief in such situations. But this day will come and restoration will take place.

<sup>35</sup> See *Church and World*, 1990, 13.

*Church and World* argues that in Jesus, God's kingdom was and continues to be in our midst (Luke 17:21). The reality of God's kingdom is embodied in the person (life) and work (ministry) of Jesus Christ, the crucified and risen Lord.<sup>36</sup> Van de Beek makes a similar remark when he writes that the proclamation of the kingdom of God resists, by its very nature, any national ideology – no matter how excellent it may seem. The kingdom of God, he argues, does not know boundaries, and the word 'national' disqualifies any discourse from the very beginning. Van de Beek describes the body of the Stranger (Christ) from heaven as a worldwide body of believers of sick, excluded, and weak people – according to worldly standards – who have a wrong confession: "Jesus is Lord."<sup>37</sup> He emphasises that the kingdom of God is the kingdom of Christ. It is the kingdom of a Stranger to the world and therefore, he says, a strange kingdom. His proclamation to the Roman Empire, "my kingdom is not of this world", does not necessarily mean that it has nothing to do with this world and neither does it mean that it is not visible in the world, because it is what we have seen with our eyes and have touched with our hands, Van de Beek states.<sup>38</sup> These remarks by Van de Beek reiterate *Church and World's* expression of the covenant of God with all nations.

Jesus' message is undoubtedly the good news of the coming kingdom of God, the liberating promise and claim of that kingdom. However, in his message to the hearers, Jesus promised this kingdom to those who are in need; the poor, the hungry, the weeping, the hated (Luke 6:20-23); and to the poor in spirit, those who mourn, the meek, to those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, the merciful, the pure in heart, the peacemakers, and to those who are persecuted for righteousness' sake (Matt. 5:3-12), says *Church and World*.<sup>39</sup> In other words, the kingdom of God is for those who act as agents and stewards of God. This paints a picture of the relationship between the church and its mission in society, hence its unity should have a positive contribution towards social contexts, as the theme of this study suggests.

Secondly, with regard to the response to the kingdom, *Church and World* notes that the immediate experience of kingdom and kingship by the early Christians revealed rather an oppressive rule of the Herodians and their Roman masters. Under this experience, people lived in fear of death and slavery. *Church and World* argues that with their bold vision and faith, Christians proclaimed a kingdom whose Lord is the suffering servant, whose life had

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<sup>36</sup> See *Church and World*, 1990, 13.

<sup>37</sup> See A. van de Beek, *Jesus and the Church as vulnerable strangers*: 2008, 263.

<sup>38</sup> See A. van de Beek, *Jesus and the Church as vulnerable strangers*: 2008, 264.

<sup>39</sup> See *Church and World*, 1990, 13.



been poured out for many for the forgiveness of sins in anticipation of the kingdom. In the kingdom, Jesus is seen as the Messiah who inaugurates and embodies the rule of God through the power of the Spirit.<sup>40</sup>

Unlike in the kingdoms and kingship of our present reality, including those of the Herodians and Roman masters, in God's kingdom justice prevails. The study document puts it clearly when it says:

Within such a kingdom domination has no place, and authority is expressed in service: in contrast to the kingdoms of this world, where great men exercise authority over them, in the kingdom of God whoever would be first among you must be servant of all.<sup>41</sup>

It must be noted that just to hear the word 'kingdom' for many means excessive power, despotic rule and alarms fearfulness. The danger of the human made kingdoms includes the violation of other people's rights<sup>42</sup>, corruption, selfishness, disunity, and malfunctioning of the church and society. All of these factors pose a danger to the life of the church and society, wherever these are in practice. However, God's kingdom represents unity where reconciliation and justice prevails. The church on earth represents God's kingdom, and in itself it must embody unity, reconciliation and justice; not only for its own sake, but also for the sake of renewing society to have morally good citizens. As a response to the coming kingdom of God, Jesus calls for the people to repent and believe in the gospel, because the kingdom of God is at hand. People are called to conversion of heart and life and faith. This is a total call for Christians to live a Eucharistic life and become morally good citizens in the world. This is a calling for conversion to a new life in union with God, says *Church and World*.<sup>43</sup> One can argue that this is a call to be responsible citizens towards the creation of God and society.

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<sup>40</sup> See *Church and World*, 1990, 14.

<sup>41</sup> See *Church and World*, 1990, 14.

<sup>42</sup> The rights of people are violated in some of these cultural rituals and way of life. In most cases because of the culture and a way of life of a certain tribe, some people find it very difficult and sometimes scary to fight for their rights as they fear exclusion in society. Women suffer the most in some of these cultural rituals and traditions. Amongst these, especially in Africa, one can mention female circumcision, forced marriages (some women are forced to marry people irrespective of their consent), and the dance of young girls in front of the king with uncovered breasts. Some of these practises are very difficult to ignore.

<sup>43</sup> See *Church and World*, 1990, 14.



*Church and World* reckons that the good news of the kingdom does not only bring forgiveness, but also renewal. Christ is in the centre as the one who forgives and renews Christians and Christian communities. One can argue that the Holy Spirit plays a fundamental role in making the renewal process possible in this regard. As *Church and World* puts it:

Renewal begins with the members of the church; but it is never for them alone. The renewal of the church is always for the sake of the human community, for which the church is a sign and foretaste of that kingdom of God which comes to us both as judgement and as promise.<sup>44</sup>

Hence, the theme of this study on church unity and social contexts is so important. The church understands clearly that it is not for its sake alone, but also for the human community that cries out for renewal. The church must strive for a unity that will renew its own life and the life of the human community.

Lastly, with regard to the promise of life in the kingdom, *Church and World* states that as a matter of hope, the coming of the kingdom is an event full of God's grace and for all humankind. It cannot be earned, but it is a gift of grace and a gift that intends to communicate God's everlasting salvation to humanity, which awaits their response of faith. As *Church and World* puts it:

The message of the kingdom is a challenge to all humanity. Because it offers a unique opportunity for new life and hope, this message confronts each individual and community with the choice between rejecting the kingdom and making a radical and total decision for it.<sup>45</sup>

*Church and World* strongly emphasises that the decisive decision to accept or reject the message of the kingdom remains with an individual.

Now, what does this promise of life in the kingdom entail? The fully accomplished kingdom of God will be a "new heaven and a new earth", as stipulated in Revelations 21:1 onwards. The life under this promised gift of new life in the kingdom is a life of hope. *Church and World* states that in this life of hope the church is given a special task, both in its mission to the poor and in being called to listen to the voice of the poor to help in discerning God's liberating activity. The church is the sign of that kingdom and that the life in the kingdom of

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<sup>44</sup> See *Church and World*, 1990, 16.

<sup>45</sup> See *Church and World*, 1990, 17.

God is not a matter of eating or drinking, but of justice and peace and joy in the Holy Spirit.<sup>46</sup> Justice in the Scriptures includes a notion of a right relationship with God and with fellow human beings. One can argue that the church as a sign of that kingdom must express this peace, this reconciliation of peoples, and this social justice of God and right relationships through its own unity for the world to see. The unity of the church must serve as an expression of the anticipated kingdom of God. According to *Church and World*, the kingdom of God is a kingdom of justice in which the oppressed are liberated and human beings live in a loving relationship with God and with others.<sup>47</sup> This promise of liberation includes the search for justice. With reference to peace in the Scriptures, the word *shalom* resembles wholeness. However, *shalom* does not mean an absence of conflict, but a state of well-being and harmony in which all relationships are rightly ordered between God, humanity and creation. *Church and World* clearly points out that peace is a promise associated with the coming of the kingdom of God and its basis is God's judgement as final judge; all other forms of peace are fragile. The role of the church is that of becoming a sign of the kingdom of God when relationships within Christian community are characterised by the recognition of the personal value and worth of each human being.<sup>48</sup>

People within the Christian community are encouraged to live the life of *koinonia* as the life of the kingdom of God is characterised by relationships of mutual interdependence like in a family. Of course, in this kingdom of God everyone feels at home and welcomed by Godself. One can also argue that the notion of *koinonia* is akin to the notion of hospitality. The whole notion of hospitality as described by the South African Reformed theologian Robert Vosloo helps us to understand this life of hope within God's kingdom. Vosloo states that hospitality is not only about welcoming, but perhaps also about being welcomed, about receiving hospitality. He further states that it is about hosts becoming guests and guests becoming hosts in a way that challenges and subverts oppressive and limiting hierarchies of power.<sup>49</sup> *Church and World* reminds us that the life of the kingdom must embrace all the nations of the earth and the boundlessness of the heavens. In a sense, the church and Christian community is entrusted with that responsibility of bringing peace and to be a sign of that eschatological

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<sup>46</sup> See *Church and World*, 1990, 17.

<sup>47</sup> See *Church and World*, 1990, 17-18.

<sup>48</sup> See *Church and World*, 1990, 19.

<sup>49</sup> See R. Vosloo, 2006. "Hospitality and Truth-telling: Revisiting the Witness of Beyers Naudé". In: Len Hansen and Robert Vosloo (eds.) *Oom Bey for the Future: Engaging the Witness of Beyers Naudé*. SUN Press, Stellenbosch, 2006, 130-134.

hope of the breaking down of barriers, which will enable the whole human community to live in peace.

*Church and World* also emphasises that the promise of the kingdom of God in Scriptures is revealed as one of joy. Table of fellowship and the sharing of meals, especially with outcasts and sinners, resembles a powerful symbol in conveying the message of the kingdom of God. As *Church and World* puts it: “The eucharist is an eschatological feast of joy, a witness that the kingdom has arrived in Jesus Christ and a foretaste of the reign of God which is yet to be.”<sup>50</sup> It can be highlighted that *Church and World* uses the Table of communion or the Eucharist as one of the key symbols of unity, joy and reconciliation and peace. It is at this Table of communion where acceptance, justice, sharing, diversity and welcoming of those in the margins of society are experienced in the form of unity in action. It is also within this perspective where church unity could play a significant role in social contexts. One can argue that in this way of sharing in the fellowship table, exclusion and all kinds of discrimination and injustices are addressed and challenged, and justice, peace and joy in the Holy Spirit prevail. The church, as always, must struggle and continue to be an effective sign to the world through its unity, service and witness that the Lord has done great things. It is in and through the Holy Spirit that the church and Christian community can proclaim the good news of the kingdom to the poor, liberate the oppressed and bring justice, peace and joy to the broken world. This brings us to the next discussion on the inter-relation between the kingdom of God, the church and humanity.

## **2.6. An inter-relation between kingdom, church and humanity**

All human beings are made in the image of God and in God’s kingdom, both the church and the whole of humanity reach their goal, *Church and World* proclaims. The inter-relation between church and humanity in their struggle for renewal and unity can be understood in their common origin and common goal dimensions. *Church and World* asserts that in the framework of the history of God’s saving action, the church participates as a mystery and prophetic sign, as a communion in and for the world.<sup>51</sup> *Church and World* further points out that in the church, humanity and the whole of creation are united with God in Jesus Christ;

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<sup>50</sup> See *Church and World*, 1990, 21.

<sup>51</sup> See *Church and World*, 1990, 22.

hence, the church can be understood as a divine-human reality that both includes and transcends its empirical and historical expressions.

According to *Church and World*, the life of the church is centralised in the risen and reigning Christ, who is its Lord, its head, and the source of its life and mission. *Church and World* states that Christ is present and active in it, even as it is his body through the power of the Holy Spirit.<sup>52</sup> It must be noted that this is the core of our belief as Christian community. Without resurrection, our faith is useless. A similar remark was made in the introductory chapter, especially with reference to the study on the *Nature and Mission of the Church*, where a point was made that the church is centred and grounded in God's Word. *Church and World* states that the church is therefore guided by the Holy Spirit into a new relationship with God and participates in the life of God, the one mystical body of Christ. The Faith and Order paper titled *The Church: Towards a common vision* alludes to this fact when it states:

The church, as the body of Christ, acts by the power of the Holy Spirit to continue his life-giving mission in prophetic and compassionate ministry and so participates in God's work of healing a broken world. Communion, whose source is the very life of the Holy Trinity, is both the gift by which the church lives and, at the same time, the gift that God calls the church to offer a wounded and divided humanity in hope of reconciliation and healing.<sup>53</sup>

Both documents, *Church and World* and the Faith and Order paper *The Church: Towards a Common Vision*, do not only highlight the role of the Holy Spirit in the life and mission of the church in the world, but also point to the essential role of church unity towards social contexts. There is a strong relationship between the church as a sign of the kingdom and what the church does to humanity in social contexts. By its participation in the Trinitarian life of communion and love, the church is thus a mystery and a sign pointing to and serving the Triune God's work towards the salvation and renewal of all humankind. The Faith and Order paper further states that the church takes its mandate from the act and promise of Christ himself, who does not only proclaim the kingdom of God in word and deed, but also called men and women and sent them out, empowered by the Holy Spirit (John 20:19-23).<sup>54</sup> A question can be asked whether the church fulfils this role in its mission today. Some further

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<sup>52</sup> See *Church and World*, 1990, 22.

<sup>53</sup> See *The Church: Towards a Common Vision*: Faith and Order Paper No.214, WCC, Geneva, 2013, 5.

<sup>54</sup> See *The Church*: 2013, 6.

questions can be asked: Does the church today serve as a sign pointing and helping the world to see the life of the kingdom? Is it worth saying that the church today is the reality of the kingdom to come? Is it also fair to say that the church needs to reconsider its position in the world and do continuous assessment of its own life as the body of Christ?

*Church and World* reckons that church members will not be separated from the rest of humanity; they are related to it in a deeper way and committed to it even more strongly. As *Church and World* puts it:

When God, from the human race, calls together the church (*ekklesia*); it is because God will it to be a sign of the reconciliation of human beings to God and to one another. It not only points to something else, but is already the effective beginning of the new humanity.<sup>55</sup>

In becoming a sign of the reconciliation, the church participates positively with its own unity to social contexts. It brings its ethical dimension to play an active and fundamental role in society. *Church and World* does not disconnect the being of the church to its witness and service in the world, these are kept together.

The church is called to be oriented towards the final coming of God's kingdom, of which it is already a foretaste with reference to the Lord's Supper. *Church and World* argues that the church, with its gift of the Holy Spirit, strengthened by Christ's Word and sacrament, is sent by God to witness to, and to proclaim the kingdom in and for this broken world through word and deed, life and suffering, even suffering unto death; the church becomes an effective sign, an instrument of God's mission in the world.<sup>56</sup> It can be argued that the church itself bears the same suffering and vulnerability in anticipation of the kingdom. The South African theologian Nico Koopman formulates this nicely when he says that the model in which the vulnerable church fulfils her calling, participates in God's mission in the world, and does ethics and public theology, which is that of vulnerability, humility, and servanthood. Koopman argues that the church in its essence is vulnerable and that this church is based on the vulnerability of the triune God and the vulnerability of human beings.<sup>57</sup> The church that is sent by God to the

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<sup>55</sup> See *Church and World*, 1990, 23.

<sup>56</sup> See *Church and World*, 1990, 23-24.

<sup>57</sup> See N. Koopman, 2008. "Vulnerable Church in a vulnerable world? Towards an Ecclesiology of Vulnerability": In: Eddy Van der Borgh (ed.) *Journal of Reformed Theology* 2, Volume 2. No.3, BRILL, The Netherlands, 241-246.

suffering and broken world is in a sense a vulnerable church, and is sent by the vulnerable God. In line with Faith and Order paper *The Church: Towards a Common Vision*, Koopman describes the public role of the church in terms of the three offices of Christ, namely Priesthood, Prophet and the King, where the church witness to Him in word and deed, teaching, and concrete action. Like their master, churches fulfil prophetic, priestly and royal servant roles in the world, Koopman says.<sup>58</sup> The nature and the mission of the church are very clear in this regard. Hence, it is so vital to understand the church and the whole Christian community as being in this world, sent to it by God, but not being of this world.

*Church and World* notes that God calls the church in the world and for the world to be the people of God. However, this call of God comes to the church in a world marked by sin and broken relationships between the creator and the creature. The reality hereof is seen in various incidents and contexts, such as apartheid South Africa, Nazi Germany, the Israel-Palestine conflicts, the riots and deaths in many African countries, to mention but a few. *Church and World* states that the historical fragmentation and the tensions and conflicts within Christianity are also having a direct impact and sometimes contribute to the brokenness of the world.<sup>59</sup> It must be noted that this poses a serious challenge to the authentic and visible unity of the church, especially regarding its service and witness in the world. In reaction against this brokenness and in search for wholeness, many people, including nations, strive for unity on the basis of aspirations and common humanity that God has given to them. Again, this reaction of the church against brokenness and the striving for visible unity on the basis of God's forgiveness is accomplished in Christ and the unity already given by Christ, *Church and World* says.<sup>60</sup> The church as mystery and prophetic sign in its work of renewal in the world is entrusted and strengthened by the Holy Spirit, and is not distorted or confused by the world's agenda.

## **2.7. The Church as mystery and prophetic sign**

The concepts of mystery and of sign were found very helpful by the unity and renewal study of the WCC, especially in the description of the place of the church in God's design and work

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<sup>58</sup> See Koopman, *Vulnerable Church in a vulnerable world?* 2008, 250-254. See also *The Church*: 2013, 11-13, especially with reference to the Prophetic, Priestly and Royal People of God's descriptions on the role of the church.

<sup>59</sup> See *Church and World*, 1990, 24.

<sup>60</sup> See *Church and World*, 1990, 25.

for renewal and salvation of humanity. *Church and World* explains that the term “mystery” denotes a basic insight that Christians already have in common, namely the admission of their inability to speak adequately about the church. When the word “mystery” is applied to the church, it refers to the church as a reality that transcends its empirical, historical expression – a reality which is rooted in, and sustained and shaped by the communion of the Father, Son and the Holy Spirit.<sup>61</sup> In his article titled *The History of Ecumenical Work on Ecclesiology and Ethics*, Peter Lodberg concurs with *Church and World* on the mystery of the church as a reality that transcends its empirical historical life in the world when it engages itself in the life of the world and points to the eschatological dimension of being the church. However, Lodberg further argues that the incarnational dimension of the church is stressed in the qualification of the church as a sign.<sup>62</sup> Mystery is revealed to faith by the Holy Spirit, who knows the deep things of God and the function of Christian preaching is to declare the mystery of Christ.

*Church and World* underlines that the mystery of the divine-human relationships revealed in Jesus is the foundation of unity and community for God’s people. On Pentecost, the Holy Spirit brought the followers of Christ into a new relationship with God as they are gathered in the church, which is sent into the world in order to be a foretaste of what the world is to become, the first fruits of the new creation. As the study document states:

The church is united with Christ in the humiliation of the Cross while at the same time it experiences the victory of the resurrection, thus making present in the life of this world the new life of the kingdom – present now, yet still to come.<sup>63</sup>

The church and creation stands together in anticipation of renewal and final redemption. According to *Church and World*, the term “mystery” and the term “sign” are closely inter-related and complementary. This can be seen in the mystery of God’s presence in the church, which is already a sign addressed to the world.

According to *Church and World*, the term “sign” is very useful in expressing the relationship between church and humanity in the perspective of the kingdom. *Church and World* asserts that the word “sign” clearly indicates that the church is there for others. It must be noted that

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<sup>61</sup> See *Church and World*, 1990, 26.

<sup>62</sup> See P. Lodberg, “The History of ecumenical work”, *Ecumenical Review* Volume 47: No.2. April 1995, 131-132.

<sup>63</sup> See *Church and World*, 1990, 27.



the church does not and must not point to itself, but beyond itself. The concept of a sign indicates the significant relation between church and world. *Church and World* argues that the church is called constantly to look both to its Lord, to whom it owes all, and to humanity, to which it is fully committed.<sup>64</sup> This emphasises the church's calling, its witness and service in the world. I want to argue that in an evaluation of *Church and World's* view, this also emphasises the role of church unity towards social contexts which goes beyond itself; a role of becoming a peacemaker, a reconciler, a unifier, and a role of bringing communion between racial, genders and between women and men in society. The church is a sign that stands between humanity and God. The church as a sign points beyond itself to the kingdom of God. Lodberg alludes to this when he states that the task of the church in the world is that of becoming an interpreter of the signs pointing towards the kingdom of God and to take an active part in the realisation of the signs.<sup>65</sup> This means if God is unity, if God is the reconciler and if God is the God of justice and love, as a sign, the church must embody this to its own life and reality. The three articles of the Belhar Confession on unity, reconciliation and justice therefore strengthens this argument on the church as a sign, especially on the call to the visible unity of the church, the church as a peacemaker, and that the church stands where God stands, with the poor on justice issues.<sup>66</sup> Both debates, as will be shown clearer later, strengthen the argument of the need for the church to embody unity, reconciliation and justice.

This emphasis on the church as sign was also alluded to at the Uppsala conference of 1968, and the point was reiterated that the church as sign is intended to keep the two aspects *intra ecclesia* and *extra ecclesia* together in a dialectical tension. Unity within the church is established by working for unity in the world outside the church. Here, *Church and World* reveals the significance of church unity for societal renewal. In a special way the church unity that is affirmed here also strongly influences good citizenship in society. In the same way, the work of unity in the world will influence the life of the church. The world is no longer a dangerous place or a stage for the church, but a place where the church must be for its own sake, if it is to be true church.<sup>67</sup> Lodberg further argues that as a sign, the church is the history of the kingdom of God in the world, but it is not the kingdom. The church is therefore called

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<sup>64</sup> See *Church and World*, 1990, 28.

<sup>65</sup> See Lodberg, *The History of ecumenical work*, 1995, 130.

<sup>66</sup> See J. Botha and P. Naudé, 2011. "The Belhar Confession (1986)": in Johan Botha and Piet Naudé: *Good News to Confess: The Belhar Confession and the road of acceptance*, Bible Media, Wellington, 19-21.

<sup>67</sup> See Lodberg, *The History of Ecumenical Work*, 1995, 130-131.



out of the world by God and is placed in the world's service. The church is in the world, but is not the world.<sup>68</sup> In a sense the divisions and irreconcilability and injustice in the world would also teach the church how to be a better church and the sign of God's kingdom in this world. One can argue that the socio-ethical challenges in the world such as injustices, divisions, including church divisions, irreconciliation of people, and domination over others, serve as indicators of reminding the church not to ignore its calling, its witness and service in the world.

The responsibility of the church is embedded in its participation in the mystery and mission of God, becoming a prophetic sign, giving guidance, participating in the *Missio Dei*, becoming a reconciler and unifier in this world. This defines the ethical engagement of the church in the world. This unity must be lived in the Christian community, and it must be a unity of interaction and solidarity. In its unity, the church becomes a symbol and hope for the world in its despair. As a sign, the world is looking up to the church and is totally dependent on the church to give guidance on how to reach the final destination of God's kingdom. Koopman offers a good analysis in this regard in terms of understanding the prophetic role of the church under the theme of being vulnerable prophets. Koopman states that this task is about spelling out a luring, inviting vision of a good society, and it is also about offering courageous criticism where the *status quo* does not adhere to that vision. This task is also about telling the narratives of suffering and despair, and of victory and hope. Prophetic speaking is about participating in policy discourses in society, where decisions have to be taken within the space of political limitations, Koopman says.<sup>69</sup>

*Church and World* observes that the term "sign" has different and diverse meanings in the Scriptures. However, in *Church and World*, the term "sign" is used in the sense of something pointing beyond itself, whilst at the same time participating in that to which it points.<sup>70</sup> The miraculous deeds of Jesus are termed as "signs" and these signs show Jesus as the one who proceeds from God and to whom attention must be given. It is through the eyes of faith that one can see the visible sign present in Jesus. According to *Church and World*:

It is Christ, present and active in the church through the Holy Spirit, who makes the church through its life, witness and service a sign of judgement and salvation

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<sup>68</sup> See Lodberg, *The History of ecumenical work*, 1995, 132.

<sup>69</sup> See Koopman, *Vulnerable Church in a vulnerable world?* 2008, 251.

<sup>70</sup> See *Church and World*, 1990, 29.

to all humankind. Thus the church is a sign pointing beyond itself to Christ, with whom it is at the same time intimately united as his body.<sup>71</sup>

*Church and World* further sees the church as a community called by God to signify and manifest God's personal relationship with God's creation, which is constantly sustained by the Holy Spirit. The struggles for peace, justice and partnership between men and women outside the church remain a call for Christian solidarity. Hence, guided by the Holy Spirit, the church must be a visible sign of unity and renewal in the world. The understanding of the church as *koinonia* has been accepted by many churches in the ecumenical world. The whole notion of *koinonia* in Christian community will be discussed at length in the next chapter. However, we can here already point to the fact that *Church and World* states that *koinonia* embraces "mystery", "prophetic sign" and other images and terms for the church, whilst *koinonia* also implies the indissoluble inter-relation between the nature and the mission of the church.<sup>72</sup> *Church and World* states that the church's prophetic ministry, both within its own life and to the world, is challenged and informed by contemporary events and causes. Therefore, the church is required in its calling to be a prophetic sign pointing to God's judgement and salvation in Jesus Christ. Amongst other events and causes in which the church should express its prophetic ministry, is the search for justice.

## **2.8. The church's role on unity and renewal and the search for justice**

It must be noted that the unity and renewal and the search for justice was chosen as one of the key elements to exemplify the inter-relation between church and ethics. In the process of unity and renewal and the search for justice, the church has a fundamental role to play. In a situation of injustice and disunity, there is a lot at stake. It can be argued that one cannot deal with unity and renewal without correcting and putting things where they belong or where they are supposed to be, and this is what justice is all about. The implications of the church's involvement in issues of justice were discussed in various consultations and some conclusions were drawn that the church, as both a mystery and prophetic sign, is the foretaste of the renewed human community made possible by the Triune God's action.

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<sup>71</sup> See *Church and World*, 1990, 30.

<sup>72</sup> See *Church and World*, 1990, 34.

According to *Church and World*, the mystery has been obscured by the divisive and oppressive actions of fellow Christians, who have betrayed their calling. But through Christ, this has been disclosed in order to lead humankind into a renewed community whenever Christian community displays God's justice in its own life and witness, and becomes a prophetic sign.<sup>73</sup> The situation of fellow Christians betraying their calling happened in different contexts around the world. It must be noted that this betrayal of calling by many Christians by their oppressive actions is still taking place in various forms in churches around the world. The apartheid system in South African could serve as one example. Churches were established along racial lines and the human community was structured in the same way. This was none other than the betrayal of the calling and the system of apartheid was therefore rejected and proclaimed as heresy and sin against humanity.<sup>74</sup> However, it must be noted that Christians live in societies where the understanding of justice is understood in different ways. *Church and World* underscores that in most cases the concept of justice is based upon an ideology and almost always used by those who have power to maintain the *status quo* and remain in power. *Church and World* also states that in most cases, Christians differ about the principles of justice.<sup>75</sup> It must be noted that even though Christians may agree on the principles of justice, disagreements often come into play when they need to apply them.

According to *Church and World*, when the churches become involved together in common witness and in joint action in matters of justice, their action and involvement should have implications for their communion with each other. In this way, they may have moved closer in communion with each other on their way to visible church unity, by talking about their differences of faith and order that have caused scandalous denominational division.<sup>76</sup> Justice functions on a level of restoring and mending broken relationships as a result of injustices, and working on renewing those relationships and achieving unity in the church and human community. However, these are not achieved by human endeavours, but are through God's justice. Church members understand justice from their relationship with God as it is found in Scripture. Given that justice came to mean goodness as right relationships, justice is not only about giving each person his or her due, but about the restoration of right relationships. For

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<sup>73</sup> See *Church and World*, 1990, 38.

<sup>74</sup> See D. J. Smit, 1984. "What does Status Confessionis mean?" In: *A Moment of Truth: The Confession of the Dutch Reformed Mission Church 1982*. Cloete and D. J. Smit (eds.) William B. Eerdmans, Grand Rapids. 1984, 7-22. See also John de Gruchy, 1986. *The Church Struggle in South Africa: Second Edition*, William B. Eerdmans, Grand Rapids, 1986, 52-54.

<sup>75</sup> See *Church and World*, 1990, 38.

<sup>76</sup> See *Church and World*, 1990, 39.

*Church and World*, God's justice is about a vindication of the poor, the widow, the stranger and all who are oppressed.<sup>77</sup> In addition, one can further say it is about restoring right relationships with those who are marginalised, stigmatised and voiceless in communities. As much as church members understand God's justice in their relationship with God, Christians and churches are faced with the question justice of God even today.

This insight is also relevant for African Christianity, where women are often oppressed and marginalised by men on the basis of the culture and Scripture. The Malawian theologian Gertrude Aopesyaga Kapuma pleads with the church leaders to give support to widows, who are in many instances oppressed by the human community and the church itself. Kapuma states that women are created in the image of God and this is hard to believe when one sees the way they are treated in most societies, even by their families. She argues that violence against women and abusive relationships are common within our communities. Kapuma blames the church for not playing any role in supporting widows in their time of need. In her plea to the church for supporting women, she writes, church leaders have tremendous potential for educating and empowering communities to treat women, and widows specifically, with respect.<sup>78</sup>

Kapuma also regards widowhood as a theological issue, as both male and female were created in the image of God and widowhood deals with the question of human dignity. She asks the following questions with respect to God's justice on women predicament: What does God say about widows? How can dignity be restored to these women when they read Scripture? As for the challenge to the church, Kapuma asks: What mechanisms or systems are there in the church to help and assist widows in their experience of pain, as well as their healing?<sup>79</sup> It must be noted that these questions are not only questions related to human dignity, but they are also questions of restoring the justice of God and the building of right relationships within the new community of God. They are questions of inclusion in the unity and renewal of human community in its search for justice. The debate on widowhood is one of many other socio-ethical challenges that need the church's intervention in restoring the justice of God amongst the members of the new community of God in its endeavour for unity that positively

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<sup>77</sup> See *Church and World*, 1990, 40.

<sup>78</sup> See G. A. Kapuma, 2012. "Widowhood: A story of pain, a need for healing": In: *Men in the pulpit, Women in the pew? Addressing gender inequality in Africa*: In: Jurgens Hendriks, Elna Mouton, Len Hansen and Elisabet le Roux (eds.), SUN Media, Stellenbosch, 2012, 61-62.

<sup>79</sup> See Kapuma, *Widowhood*, 2012, 68.

contributes to social contexts. Hence this study seeks to investigate the role that church unity could play in social contexts.

The aspect of social and communal justice plays a vital role in this regard in terms of understanding that right relationships include a good life for all. *Church and World* asserts that as a result of human sinfulness, the structures of justice are frequently and easily twisted. I want to argue that these structures cannot remain this way; the *status quo* needs to be challenged, the question of justice needs to be addressed and justice be restored as part of God's design. If the church is to be faithful and trustworthy in its calling, it will then need, as a community of shared faith and values, to exhibit God's justice in its own corporate life, says *Church and World*.<sup>80</sup> The way to establish the justice of God is not easy; there is a lot of pain involved until justice is fully realised and established. Only when justice is established can unity and renewal be functional in a broken human community.

*Church and World* further indicates that questions related to justice always take place in a particular context and time. Christians always go back to Scripture and start to engage with it in finding ways of addressing any unjust situation in order to establish God's justice. This is also true of the South African context in which the Belhar Confession was launched as a church document that addressed the unity of the church, the true reconciliation of Christ and the justice of God in response to a certain situation in which the church was compelled to respond for the renewal of human community and the restoration of God's justice.<sup>81</sup> *Church and World* argues that Christians become fully aware of the fact that the search for justice is both a divine calling and a human endeavour. As justice is also a divine calling, how reliable is the justice executed in churches and in Christian communities? In order to understand the question of justice in a particular context, Christians should ask the question, "What is God saying to us at this time and place?" as they hear the word of God within their own context. Churches respond differently to questions of justice, unity and renewal and it always depends on context and situation. What is significant in each response is that the churches learn from each other's experiences in dealing with these challenges. *Church and World* states that as Christians in different situations confront their tasks, they become fully aware that they are not alone in their struggle in search for justice, unity and renewal, but that God and the human

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<sup>80</sup> See *Church and World*, 1990, 42.

<sup>81</sup> For understanding the context to which justice in South Africa was nothing less but a demand, See *A Moment of Truth: The Confession of the Dutch Reformed Mission Church* 1982, D. Cloete and D. J. Smit (eds.) William B. Eerdmans, Grand Rapids, 1984.

community are part of them.<sup>82</sup> It must be noted that the co-operation between the church and human communities in searching for justice is fundamental.

In a process of renewal, it is understood that the life of the church is not separated from human sinfulness that includes divisions, oppressions and confusions. *Church and World* affirms that Jesus Christ is the main ground of renewal that is present through the Holy Spirit in word and sacrament, the sole foundation, life giving principle, and hope of the church.<sup>83</sup> Being in Christ, having new life in him must be witnessed and find its expression in the life of the church. This new life in Christ and his justice must be visibly lived and practised and a new life-style be witnessed in Christians and their communities, and this will give credible testimony to the readiness of the church to be used by God as instrument for the renewal of human community, says *Church and World*.<sup>84</sup> I would like to argue that the visible unity and the practice of visible justice remains a challenge for the churches. There are constant conflicts within the new community of Christ that has to embody visible unity and true justice of God. As a result of this lack of embodying unity and justice, the credibility of the church is questioned.

The church as mystery participates in the powerlessness of God as revealed in the life and suffering of Jesus, hence it is called to be in solidarity with all those who are without power, the poor, and the marginalised. As a prophetic sign, the church also participates in God's action of raising the meek and lowly, hence it is called to advocate a fair distribution of power and responsible use of power.<sup>85</sup> *Church and World* further emphasises that all forms of injustice, racism, separation and lack of freedom are challenged tremendously when we share the Eucharist. The Eucharist vision compels the churches towards a goal of visible unity and the search for justice and renewal.<sup>86</sup> It is fundamental for the church to follow in the footsteps of Jesus Christ, in his obedience on the way of the cross that involves suffering. It must be noted that it is required of the church to carry the cross of Jesus Christ, which addresses all the questions of peace, reconciliation, justice and unity and follow him and suffer for the cause. Through the Holy Spirit, the church is empowered to address and challenge all forms of injustices in human community. As part of the search for justice in situations of injustices

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<sup>82</sup> See *Church and World*, 1990, 44-45.

<sup>83</sup> See *Church and World*, 1990, 46.

<sup>84</sup> See *Church and World*, 1990, 46.

<sup>85</sup> See *Church and World*, 1990, 47-48.

<sup>86</sup> See *Church and World*, 1990, 47.

in human community, the unity and renewal in the community of women and men becomes crucial.

## **2.9. The role of church unity and renewal in the community of women and men**

The document also reflected on church unity from the perspective of the ecclesiological significance of the search for a more complete and authentic community of women and men. This theme, as the previous theme on unity and renewal and the search for justice, addressed the response of the church on socio-ethical challenges in and outside the church. *Church and World* underscores that the community of women and men is marked by God's gift of love for God's creation and that further to this perspective, this community of women and men is brought to fulfilment in the kingdom of God. God's salvation is realised as love, which essentially expresses itself in a new community.<sup>87</sup>

This led the WCC's to the interest in addressing these ethical issues, especially when speaking of church unity and renewal of human community. The South African feminist theologian Elna Mouton observes that to account for the authority and ongoing relevance of Scripture and its history of interpretation in the light of the experience of humankind, especially women and children, has become a test question for biblical interpretation. Mouton argues that in the process the position and role, silence or absence of women in the Bible, as well as the more general issue of women and the Bible have come under serious scrutiny.<sup>88</sup> In many cases, Christians use the Bible to oppress women in the church and this also influences the life of women in society. If the church is found guilty of this oppression towards women and perhaps some men, what would be the implications of its advocacy towards social contexts? This question relates to the interest of this study on church unity and social contexts, especially on the question of the significance of church unity in social contexts. This study advocates for the unity of the church that will address these socio-ethical challenges by taking into account the role of the church as peacemaker, reconciler and an ambassador of the justice of God.

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<sup>87</sup> See *Church and World*, 1990, 50.

<sup>88</sup> See E. Mouton, 2002. "Gereformeerde vroue ná 350 Jaar: Hervormend, Helend, Hoopvol?" In: Pieter Coertzen (ed.) *350 Years Reformed*, CLF, Bloemfontein, 2002, 302.



According to *Church and World*, many Christians in the New Testament found it difficult to relate to one another in church life. However, they were taught about God's saving work in Christ and how their relationships should be maintained as equals in Christ.<sup>89</sup> In Christ a new community of women and men is established, and a new relationship to Christ and to one another became a reality. *Church and World* argues that the calling of women and men to live together in a Christian community has great expectations of continual growth to maturity through the Holy Spirit that binds them as a unity. Mouton reiterates the point made by *Church and World* when she argues that the Bible does not wish to bind us in rigid, legalistic ways, but rather to liberate us toward the imaginative appropriation of the mighty, healing power of God's love in new circumstances. Mouton writes:

To respect the reformatory potential of the Bible is to dedicate ourselves to accomplishing the full potential of the body of Christ. Anything less would confine the God of the Bible to the boundaries of ancient canonised texts in a way contradictory to their own nature, and could therefore not be considered as normative.<sup>90</sup>

*Church and World* is correct when stating that a Christian community lives in anticipation of God's kingdom and whenever this community comes together in communion service, it remembers the foundation of its own life in Christ's death, his living presence until his coming again.<sup>91</sup> In a true sense, this community realises its brokenness and weaknesses in its human relationships and marked by clear injustices in the church and society. Although difficult in many cases, the church struggles to ensure that these relationships are correct in the community of women and men, hence it depends on Christ as the transformer and to the help of the Holy Spirit in guiding the church to make right decisions. It is evident that the community of women and men is called by God as God's church, God's people to live as a Christian community in its diversity and embrace one another's strength and weaknesses. Such a community of women and men will reflect an authentic Christian community.

In this regard *Church and World* reminds us that the community of women and men as God's gift and a new community must live out this gift and reflect this image in its communion, which represents God as the loving parent. *Church and World* further argues that the church

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<sup>89</sup> See *Church and World*, 1990, 50.

<sup>90</sup> See Mouton, *Gereformeerde vroue ná 350 Jaar*, 2002, 304.

<sup>91</sup> See *Church and World*, 1990, 51.



as prophetic sign of that which God desires for both women and men in this new community must embody that community in its own life. It must reflect God in the life of the church, whilst searching for a more complete and authentic community of women and men.<sup>92</sup> However, one can argue that the task of searching for a more complete and authentic community of women and men is not an easy one, as many Christians are more traditional with regard to the roles of women and men in the church and society.

*Church and World* strongly criticises the domination of men over women in communal life. As *Church and World* puts it:

The domination of men over women does not belong to human community as God intended for his creation (Gen. 2:23), but it is due to the results of sin which distorts the community of women and men as well as the relationship between human beings and nature (Gen. 3:16-19).<sup>93</sup>

It must be noted that the domination of men over women is a challenge that is found all over the world and most probably excels in African countries and churches. However, this does not suggest that other countries are not experiencing this problem. Mouton objects to the exclusion of women by men in leadership positions, whether this happens in the church or in the community, especially with justification from the Bible. She points out that this exclusion of women from leadership positions in the church for centuries sadly points to a fundamental flaw in the church's understanding of God, itself and society.<sup>94</sup> Mouton concludes that this does not only concern the heart of the Reformed confessional tradition, but also the primary identity of the Christian faith.

This domination of men over women is very common amongst Black African Christian churches, although I am not saying that this dominance is absent amongst White Christians. This challenges regarding gender justice were emphasised among others by the Namibian theologian Simon Gillham during a conference at the Faculty of Theology at Stellenbosch University in 2012 on gender inequality in Africa and the role of women and men in our churches. In his contribution titled *Combating gender-based violence: The Bible's teaching on gender complementarity*, Gillham writes that teaching the Bible properly in Southern

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<sup>92</sup> See *Church and World*, 1990, 51.

<sup>93</sup> See *Church and World*, 1990, 51.

<sup>94</sup> See Mouton, Gereformeerde vroue ná 350 Jaar, 2002, 304.

Africa is of critical importance because a majority of men in this part of the world claim to be Christian. Gillham goes further to state that there is a history of men using the Bible to justify their exploitation of women on the basis that wives must submit to their husbands.<sup>95</sup>

Again, this remains a big challenge for the community of men and women, as this domination is often accompanied by sexual violence and assault. Gillham is of the opinion that the husband's response described in Genesis 3:16 that the husband will rule over, master or dominate his wife, is not the same thing as the responsibility and order described in the creation narrative of Genesis 2, but it is a kind of ruling, mastery or domination that is a consequence and expression of sin. For Gillham, it is exactly this expression of sin that we see played out in the brutal violence and subjugation of women across Southern Africa; conflict in marriages that end with men ruling over, oppressing and crushing their wives.<sup>96</sup> The question could be asked how this problem of gender domination can be addressed in a community of women and men. Can the church play a vital role in addressing this problem in a community where culture and tradition remains the utmost important guide for a life style? Christians strongly believe that Christ's body is the church, and that the church is to be a place of such reconciliation.

In an attempt to address this challenge, *Church and World* argues that as mystery, the church participates in God's desire for the fullness of life for all humanity. As a prophetic sign, the church also participates in God's reconciling will for humanity and is called to express this in its own life, where women and men have a common belonging in Christ; as *Church and World* states: "In Christ all are led into a new community, one which is already a foretaste of the kingdom of God."<sup>97</sup> As a result of the changing world situation, the Christian community faces some of these challenges and seeks to understand the changing world by using all resources available. Ultimately, they look for the theological and spiritual implications and opportunities in the challenges confronting humanity. Amongst other challenges raised by *Church and World* are changes in society, changes in marriage and the family, as well the hope of liberation for women and men discussed on the one hand, and on the other hand,

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<sup>95</sup> See S. Gillham, 2012. "Combating gender-based violence: The Bible's teaching on gender complementarity." In: *Men in the pulpit, Women in the pew? Addressing gender inequality in Africa*: In: Jurgens Hendriks, Elna Mouton, Len Hansen and Elisabet le Roux (eds.), SUN Media, Stellenbosch, 2012, 95.

<sup>96</sup> See Gillham, Combating gender-based violence, 2012, 97.

<sup>97</sup> See *Church and World*, 1990, 51-52.

Christian perspectives on the newness of the gospel, relationships in Christ, and ministries of the church discussed as means of seeking a renewed community of women and men today.

With regard to the changes in society, *Church and World* takes cognisance of the fact that significant changes continue to take place in the situation of contemporary women; nevertheless, the speed and extent of change differ tremendously. These changes in the situation of women also affect the lives of men. One example is that which *Church and World* underscores on exclusion of women in taking decisions in marriage and family life. Additionally, those who are single and without children further experience discrimination and marginalisation daily.<sup>98</sup> Kapuma relates her experience with regard to this situation as she state that her husband was buried against his wish of being buried at her own village. Her husband's family decided to bury him at his village both against her wishes and his own. As this caused a growing pain in her heart and perhaps anger towards her in-laws, Kapuma writes: "Every time we go to the grave, we are reminded of that painful decision made by in-laws."<sup>99</sup> These facts unveil the tensions and injustices within the human community and also highlight the need for its renewal. One can argue that not all these changes have had a positive impact on the community of women and men. Rather, they expose how fragmented and imperfect the structures in the community of women and men are. The church in its efforts for visible unity has a fundamental role to play in the renewal of human community, especially with regard to socio-ethical issues that keep on dismantling the community of women and men.

I want to argue that the vulnerability of the community of women and men is a reflection of a vulnerable church that needs to search for healing, a new life, and meaning in the gospel of Christ. These are serious ethical issues that need to be addressed with the support from the church in allowing people to talk freely about the pressing issues of inequality in order to find an authentic and true community of women and men. According to *Church and World*, Jesus Christ demonstrates a way of life for all Christians by setting up an example. He shows to all women and men a way of relationship, which is honest, respectful, and open to growth and change, a way of pointing to a life in new community within God's kingdom. *Church and World* also emphasises that men and women, as images of this triune God, are therefore

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<sup>98</sup> See *Church and World*, 1990, 55.

<sup>99</sup> See Kapuma, *Widowhood*: 2012, 63.

intrinsically relational. As bearers of God's image, men and women become fully human as they live a life that reflects this Trinity.<sup>100</sup>

Another of the challenges of the church has to do with the ministries of women and the question of their ordination, which became more complex. It has been part of the concerns and discussions of the WCC for a number of years. Recognition must be given to those churches that have crossed the boundaries by ordaining women to become ministers and bishops in the church. Some churches do not allow women to be ordained to ministry of the word. In South Africa, we have a number of churches that have already ordained women as ministers and bishops. Amongst these churches in South Africa is the Uniting Reformed Church in Southern Africa, with Rev. Prof. Mary-Anne Plaatjies van Huffel as moderator of its General Synod. She has also recently been elected as one of the vice-presidents of the World Council of Churches (and Africa representative) at its 2013 10<sup>th</sup> Assembly in Korea, and the Methodist Church of Southern Africa, which ordained Rev. Dr. Purity Malinga as a bishop and many other churches. Although these women are working as ministers in the church, they are facing severe challenges from their male colleagues in ministry. One can further state that although their role is equal to their male counterparts, in most cases some women ministers feel very uneasy to express their gifts fully in active church ministry. Even in local congregations the leadership of women ministers is being tested and challenged by some men within the church councils where they serve. However, *Church and World* pleads that within the diversity of the ministry of the laity, the work of Christian women – whether as mothers, homemakers, church workers in society or in secular professions and employment – needs to be affirmed.<sup>101</sup> This means that all people should be allowed and enabled to exercise their gifts in the church as members of the same body of Christ.

*Church and World* also pleads that the issue of the diversity of ministries in the church must be taken seriously with new insight of the New Testament references to the roles of women.<sup>102</sup> It must be noted that the right interpretation of the Biblical passages pertaining to the ministries of women in church life remains a complex issue. *Church and World* takes cognisance of the fact that churches could not reach consensus on the issue of ordination of women to a full ministry and this alone causes tension and dividedness. The ordination of

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<sup>100</sup> See *Church and World*, 1990, 56-57.

<sup>101</sup> See *Church and World*, 1990, 60.

<sup>102</sup> See *Church and World*, 1990, 60.

women remains divisive within the ecumenical movement.<sup>103</sup> Churches are encouraged to seriously study and pray for the guidance of the Holy Spirit on this issue, as their relations form part of the search for the fullness of Christian unity in truth. The status of women and men as equals in Christ also forms part of the church's calling. Both are created and called to serve in the same community. There are many Christians and churches however, who reject that women and men are equal in Christ. All human societies are affected by the issues of the community of women and men and the way in which they are addressed by each human community remains a challenge not only for the church, but also the society. This is where the issue of language and power as a challenge to a Christian community comes into play.

## **2.10. Language and Power: A Challenge to Christian Community**

*Church and World* underscores that today Christians need the help of the Holy Spirit to hear together what God is saying to all God's people and also find it necessary to reflect on language, issues of power, empowerment and service when dealing with the issues concerning the promotion of justice and the community of women and men.<sup>104</sup> The use of language by individuals and communities, Christians and Christian communities is mainly to communicate with one another and shape, share and defend their identity and the deepest values. *Church and World* notes that particular languages may have forms and be used in ways of including or excluding certain people or groups within the same community, depending on the manner in which they are used. As *Church and World* states:

The sensitive use of language can be a powerful tool for upbuilding the community; but an insensitive use of language may reflect stereotypes and reinforce sexism, racism, ageism, and other sources of alienation and injustice, thus harming the community.<sup>105</sup>

This may suggest that the use of language could be a powerful source for the unity we seek, whilst at the same time it could divide the church and society if used insensitively. One can argue that for an effectively unity of the church in social contexts, one has to take cognisance of the use of language and the exercise of power. In a sense, language reinforces the beliefs and attitudes of a community and at the same time, is changing and developing in response to

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<sup>103</sup> See *Church and World*, 1990, 62.

<sup>104</sup> See *Church and World*, 1990, 65.

<sup>105</sup> See *Church and World*, 1990, 65.

changes and developments in the community. The use of inclusive language in the search for justice for a fuller community of women and men is very helpful. *Church and World* states that the language of a Christian community, above all, should build the life of the community and its members in their full diversity. However, the use of language in a way has to do with the whole question of formation and malformation that will be discussed in chapter four of this study.

It can also further be argued that the use of language can add value to the unity of the churches that have managed to find one another, even in South Africa. For the unity of the churches in South Africa, especially amongst the DR family of churches, language will pose a challenge as they also trying to address what diversity means for them as Christians after apartheid. Again, I want to argue that Christians should be sensitive to the enriching diversity of languages and by all means they should try to not use language as a tool for excluding others in the unity we seek.

The South African Reformed theologian Daniël Louw, in his contribution at the International Reformed Theological Institute (IRTI) conference in the Netherlands 8-10 October 2003, under the conference theme *Affirming and Living with Differences*, states that the basic problem in South African society that needs to be addressed is whether it is possible to find a formula whereby people who have been forced to live separate by racial laws can live together in a common society, and whether religion can play a constructive role in this regard.<sup>106</sup> Louw further suggest that in order to establish a model for cultural accommodation in South Africa, we need an integrative factor, a space where diversity can be celebrated within the parameters of a very unique sense of belongingness, the fellowship and *koinonia* of the church.<sup>107</sup> *Church and World* suggests that Christians in each place must continue to reflect on the issues of language and its use and that Christians must ensure that their own words shape, sustain and communicate that Christian community is grounded in God's Word for all men and women, which is Jesus Christ.<sup>108</sup> Such a way of using the language guarantees a fruitful life and a true community of women and men.

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<sup>106</sup> See D. Louw, 2003. "The unity of the rainbow versus the diversity of cultures? In search of a common ground and an integrative factor": In Eddy Van der Borcht (ed.) *Affirming and Living with Differences. Studies of the Reformed Theology 12*, Meinema, Zoetermeer, 2003, 44.

<sup>107</sup> See Louw, The unity of the rainbow, 2003, 58.

<sup>108</sup> See *Church and World*, 1990, 68-69.

Again, it must be noted that the community life, as well as the life in Christian community, involves the exercise of power. The exercise of power within these communities is understood and used in different ways. In light of this perspective, Louw argues that one cannot separate the problem of unity and the problem of diversity from the most dominating factor within the tension of the use and misuse of power. He further states that when theology comes into play, the notion of power is immediately linked to a very specific understanding of God's power.<sup>109</sup> According to *Church and World*, power is often used in a way that distorts life within the community and prevents the full development of the gifts of all its members. This exercise of power is often called the misuse of power or a negative way of exercising power. It can be argued that the exercise of power in the church, as well as in society, is often linked to men and to those who are economically strong. Their influence in church and society is very powerful because of social status. However, their influence can be both positive and contribute to the wellness of the church and society, or it can be negative and destroy them. The power vested to the white DRC in South Africa working in close relationship with the state during the apartheid could serve as one example in this regard. This will be shown later in chapter five of this study, where the whole issue of church divisions that resulted to segregation policy will be discussed. In a nutshell, one can argue that the exercise of power by the church in South African context posed a threat and danger to its own life and society.

*Church and World* further sees power in two ways; quantitative and qualitative. As quantitative, it means that a gain in power for one person means a loss of power for another, and power as qualitative could mean that such power can be shared and more power becomes available for the growth of individuals and their community.<sup>110</sup> The exercise of quantitative power is not the preference for community and Christian community life. Through the help of the Holy Spirit, the church is set and called to follow the qualitative model as a Christian community in order to become the sign and instrument for the renewal of the human community. The life of the Christian community must be conformed to the life of Jesus Christ. The lessons from Christ's life leaves the Christian community with a big challenge and a range of issues to be addressed in order to fulfil what God desires a community of women and men to be like. *Church and World* further underscores that unity and renewal as

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<sup>109</sup> See Louw, *The unity of the rainbow*, 43.

<sup>110</sup> See *Church and World*, 1990, 69.

an eschatological promise focuses much more on the biblical text (Romans 12:12), to “rejoice in your hope, be patient in tribulation, be constant in prayer.”<sup>111</sup>

However, I concur with *Church and World* when it states that the very existence of the church in the midst of so much distress and trouble should be a sign to the world that the church will never be left without God’s sustaining power.<sup>112</sup> The church hopes and trusts in the redemptive power and promise of faithfulness of God to his entire creation. Christians, in spite of their weakness and fears, can live with confidence and trust in the promises of God. It is through prayer that Christians keep their constant communication with God and illuminate the light of hope for a new community of women and men that is marked by visible unity amongst women and men, true reconciliation and compassionate justice of God. In this new community of women and men, a life of communion is live and the gifts of their diversity are enriched.

## 2.11. Conclusion

The *Church and World* study document contributes greatly to the relevance of the theme and the questions raised by this study on the significance of church unity towards social contexts. The reason for this argument is that, from the beginning, *Church and World* clearly pointed out that the unity of the church cannot be separated from its witness and service. For *Church and World* the calling of the church is tightly connected to its vocation. This means that the unity of the church must have a positive role to play in social contexts by addressing the key issues raised in the *Church and World* study document pertaining to justice and peace in human community that is crying out for renewal. *Church and World* challenges the church to look anew to its calling in its endeavour for church unity. *Church and World* gives a much clearer description of the relationship between ecclesiology and ethics and also builds the argument on the fact that the church should keep the inter-relation between its calling for the search for visible unity and its search for common witness and service.

*Church and World* attempts to relate the unity of the church and the church’s response to socio-ethical challenges in various contexts where the church exists. It becomes evident in *Church and World* that in its calling for unity, the church has a bigger role to play in renewing

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<sup>111</sup> See *Church and World*, 1990, 74.

<sup>112</sup> See *Church and World*, 1990, 77.



the human community than merely looking at itself. One of the significant highlights of *Church and World* on the importance of the role of the church towards social contexts was that the internal unity of the church must have an influence outside the church boundaries. This means that the unity of the church that we seek must be visible and play a powerful renewal role in social contexts. Hence, as called by God, its mission, as well as its identity, is understood from the point of view of God's kingdom as both a mystery and a prophetic sign. As a mystery, the church participates in God's desire for the fullness of life for all humanity and as a prophetic sign the church participates in God's reconciling will for humanity and is called to express this in its own life where women and men have a common belonging in Christ. Here, we see the relation between church and ethics.

However, *Church and World* raised some serious ethical questions with regard to the challenges in the church and the world and the church's response on these challenges. It became evident in *Church and World* that the responsibility of the church is not only embedded in its struggle for visible unity, but also in the church's response to the human community crying out for renewal. The remaining questions are what the church can do and how it can respond to these issues raised by *Church and World*, especially the questions on peace and justice issues within the church and human community. Can the unity of the church play a powerful role in social contexts? These questions beg for further reflection. With regard to *Church and World*, one of the challenging questions that I find interesting on the role of the church on the renewal of human community is, how can the church participate in this renewal fully without relegating itself to a Non-Governmental Organization (NGO) or Non-Profit Organization (NPO)? Many churches fall into this trap of losing focus on their vocation and accidentally become entrepreneurs. But it is also increasingly important that the Christian community in its *koinonia* can play a significant role in human community. *Church and World* pleads for an authentic community of women and men as a source for the church's witness and service in the world. It becomes more evident that the church requires a visible unity, a *koinonia* that will make it much stronger when facing the challenges of the world. The unity of the church without witness and service will make no difference to the world.

The search for justice and concerns regarding the community of women and men are strong building blocks for the implications of the visible unity of the church we are striving for. The question is whether the churches are willing to face the challenges brought up in the study document. Is the church ready to respond to the world challenges that seem to test its

credibility and its witness to the world? Is the unity of the church at present strong and effective enough to stand against the obstacles that seem to undermine its very existence and its mission in the world crying out for renewal and the care for creation, for visible unity, true reconciliation and the justice of God? Can church unity be effective in renewing and healing the continuously broken human communities? *Church and World* makes it clear that this struggle for unity and renewal is not for the sake of the church alone, but also for the world that is crying for renewal. *Church and World* pleads for a community of women and men that upholds the values of the kingdom and proposes that Christians should live a life of communion, a *koinonia* life and embrace our diversity. This notion of *koinonia* enriches our diversity and enables us to give witness and service to the world that is crying out for renewal. The notion of *koinonia* took a centre stage in endeavours to bring ecclesiology and ethics together.

## Chapter 3

### *Koinonia* in Faith, Life, and Witness

#### 3.1. Introduction

It took about 30 years for the world conference on Faith and Order to take place again. Since the last conference held in Montreal, Canada in 1963, the fifth world conference under the theme *Towards Koinonia in Faith, Life and Witness*, took place in Santiago de Compostela in August 1993. The notion of *koinonia* has been the driving force for church unity in the ecumenical world debates, especially during the Seoul conference in 1990. It became evident that during this gap of 30 years between the fourth and the fifth world conferences, many things had happened in the ecumenical movement. As a matter of fact, the ecumenical movement faced many internal changes, as well as external challenges. It must be noted that there were both positive and negative challenges during this long break between the Faith and Order world conferences.

However, at the 1993 world conference in Spain, the World Council of Churches' Faith and Order Commission had to deal with several key issues related to the visible unity of the church, whilst at the same time encouraging the churches to stand firm on the existing unity and resist any division that might occur. Churches were time and again encouraged to identify and struggle together in finding issues that remained barriers and a challenge towards church unity.<sup>1</sup> In preparation for the fifth world conference, the Faith and Order Commission engaged the churches in conversation on the present stance, and the future of the ecumenical movement. Out of the responses from these conversations and dialogues held, a paper was subsequently produced to help the conference as a basis for discussion.<sup>2</sup>

According to the discussion paper, the hope was that the churches would be challenged and motivated to take initiatives towards *koinonia* in faith, life and witness by means of being

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<sup>1</sup> See *Towards Koinonia in Faith, Life and Witness: a discussion paper*, April 1993. Faith and Order Paper No. 161, WCC, Geneva, 1993, 5. See the same *Discussion Paper* of Faith and Order Fifth world Conference in: *On the way to Fuller Koinonia: Official Report of the Fifth World Conference on Faith and Order*, Thomas F. Best and Günther Gassmann (eds.), Faith and Order Paper no. 166, WCC, Geneva, 1994, 263-295.

<sup>2</sup> See *Towards Koinonia in Faith, Life and Witness*, 1993, 5-6.

instruments of God's reconciling and transforming purpose to all humanity and creation.<sup>3</sup> This chapter will discuss some of the important issues raised by the discussion paper, which revived the debate on church unity and its significance for social contexts. This chapter will discuss the significant changes in the world and within the ecumenical movement as challenges for the search for meaningful and fruitful *koinonia* in faith, life and witness in a divided world. I will also look at the discussion paper's understanding of *koinonia* and its significance for humanity and creation. This chapter will also discuss the significant connection between these three sub-themes, namely, *koinonia* in faith (confessing the one faith to God's glory), *koinonia* in life (sharing a common life in Christ), and *koinonia* in witness (being called to common witness for a renewed world).

### **3.2. *Koinonia* in a time of change**

Faith and Order took cognisance of the fact that *koinonia* in faith, life and witness is taking place in a changing world, time and ecumenical situation. In his opening remark of his contribution at this conference, Emeritus Archbishop Desmond Tutu notes that it has become trite to observe that we have experienced momentous changes in the world in recent years. Tutu comments that the church's context, its *Sitz im Leben*, has dramatically changed in the space of just a few years. In his presentation at the conference under the theme *Towards Koinonia in Faith, Life and Witness*, Tutu observes that there is no longer a Berlin wall, no longer two Germanies, but one united state and one people, and no longer a Soviet Union. Looking at his own context, Tutu joyfully states that the world rejoices with what has been happening in South Africa to vindicate the anti-apartheid movement and the release of former President Nelson Mandela from prison; that South Africa is waiting with bated breath for the end of apartheid and the establishment of a new dispensation, a democratic, non-racial, and non-sexist South Africa.<sup>4</sup> William Henn notes that from these testimonies of Desmond Tutu at this conference at Santiago de Compostela, one of the more poignant moments was the testimony to the effect that apartheid was too strong for a divided church, and that Christians

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<sup>3</sup> See *Towards Koinonia in Faith, Life and Witness*, 1993, 6.

<sup>4</sup> See D. Tutu, 1994. "Towards koinonia in Faith, Life and Witness": In: Thomas F. Best and Günther Gassmann (eds.) *On the way to Fuller Koinonia. Official Report of the Fifth World Conference on Faith and Order*, Publication No. 166, WCC, Geneva, 1994, 93-94.

who are still in fact not reunited in full communion, nevertheless joined together to oppose apartheid.<sup>5</sup>

In its calling, the church is therefore challenged to embrace *koinonia* in faith, life and witness. The regional consultations held in preparation for the fifth world conference had raised this awareness, whilst at the same time the interdependence of the church and the world became evident.<sup>6</sup> The discussion paper argues that it is impossible to make sense of the call to become a communion in faith, life and witness, without relating our vision of that communion to the changing world and ecumenical scene.<sup>7</sup> It must be noted that the life of the church, the way we worship, our prayers and our wishes, are much more influenced by the realities of this changing world we live in. One can further argue that the time in which this *koinonia* is to be contested and embraced is very crucial and challenging; not only for the church, but also for the world.

In the three decades between the two world conferences, namely, Montreal (1963) and Santiago (1993), things indeed have drastically changed in the world. Amongst other changes identified in the world includes the economic and social divide that grows every day between the northern and southern hemisphere, the unjust distribution of resources worldwide, the increasing number of political refugees, the violence against women and children, and the spread of HIV/AIDS, to mention but a few.<sup>8</sup> Again, the discussion paper notes that some of these issues are not new, but the extent to which they took place became worse than before, especially in the case of violence against women and children, as well as the spread of HIV/AIDS in the world. It can be argued that in Africa especially, the spread of HIV/AIDS is very high and the reported cases of rape and violence against women and children are frightening.

There are also a few other issues related to the social and economic divide that had direct impact on the church struggle for unity and the church's involvement in the world. Amongst these challenges, the discussion paper clearly indicates that about four to five billion people are excluded from economic opportunities, whilst others have their rights violated in most

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<sup>5</sup> See W. Henn, 1995. "Reactions and Responses... to Costly Unity and to the Discussion in Santiago: A Roman Catholic Perspective". *Ecumenical Review*: Volume. 47, No.2 April 1995, 145.

<sup>6</sup> See *Towards Koinonia in Faith, Life and Witness*, 1993, 7.

<sup>7</sup> See *Towards Koinonia in Faith, Life and Witness*, 1993, 7.

<sup>8</sup> See *Towards Koinonia in Faith, Life and Witness*, 1993, 7.

places. Minorities are not protected, especially those who are refugees of wars and poverty.<sup>9</sup> However, these challenges call for the church to provide a response, especially on justice issues. Offering a response of hope in a moment of despair to these changing realities in the world, Desmond Tutu observes:

The unity of the church in its *koinonia* may have something to offer to a world that is rapidly disintegrated in some places. Our identity as Christians, which transcends all sorts of barriers and distinctions could give hope to those who are floundering in this time of flux, wondering who they are.<sup>10</sup>

It must be noted that these challenges do not only affect the world, but also the church. In relation to the protection of war and poverty refugees, in South Africa we have witnessed new xenophobic attacks in 2012 in parts of Cape Town and in Botshabelo in the Free State. In May 2013, the 25 year old Abdi Nasir Mahmoud Good of Somali was stoned to death and three other Somali shopkeepers were killed in June 2013. These incidents took place in Cape Town, Pretoria, and Port Elizabeth respectively. This led the Prime Minister of Somali Abdi Farah Shirdon to express his country's concern for the safety of Somalis in South Africa, calling on the South African government to intervene to stop this violence against Somali people.<sup>11</sup> The question can be asked as to what specific role the churches can play in the public sphere where these challenges seem to threaten the lives of people in social contexts. The discussion paper underscores that Christians and churches do not have simple solutions for these problems, yet they are called to be engaged in the process of finding solutions to these issues in their respective communities.<sup>12</sup> It must be noted that *Church and World* (discussed in the previous chapter) also raised similar challenges and yet there are many other social challenges related to those mentioned previously, like gender-based violence, inequalities between women and men in society, and the escalating violence related to the abuse of women and children.

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<sup>9</sup> See *Towards Koinonia in Faith, Life and Witness*, 1993, 7-8.

<sup>10</sup> See Tutu, *Towards koinonia in Faith, Life and Witness*: 1994, 95. Amongst other points of criticism, Tutu raises a concern about the spectacular scientific and technological advances. Tutu states that any euphoria accompanying these has had to be tempered by the sobering fact that modern sophisticated medicine stands, so far, baffled by the pandemic of AIDS. He adds that genetic engineering, surrogate motherhood, artificial insemination by donor or father and test-tube babies are presenting novel moral and ethical problems. See, Tutu, 1994, 95.

<sup>11</sup> For more information on the history of xenophobic attacks in South Africa even earlier than 1994 until 2013 see, [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/xenophobia\\_in\\_South\\_Africa#New\\_Attacks\\_in\\_2012](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/xenophobia_in_South_Africa#New_Attacks_in_2012) [Accessed 14 June 2014].

<sup>12</sup> See *Towards Koinonia in Faith, Life and Witness*, 1993, 8

The discussion paper encourages the churches to join with people of other faiths, non-governmental organisations, governments, voluntary movements and groups in dealing with all these challenges and situations in the world.<sup>13</sup> These challenges and situations call for the participation of all in order to contribute to the formation of morally good citizens in the community. With regard to South Africa, one can argue that the church and state partnership became severely compromised since 2009 when President Jacob Zuma took office.<sup>14</sup> There is no formal partnership in practice between the religious groups and government in South Africa. There is no way that the government can resolve some of these challenges without the partnering with influential and massive organisations such as the religious sector. As it will be shown later in this study, the concluding chapter will shed some light on this challenge of church and state relations in South Africa. It can be argued that the church in partnership with other stakeholders can make a positive contribution if they work together towards finding solutions for the problems and challenges encountered by many people in life. Unless these issues are being addressed and dealt with properly, church unity would be impossible to achieve because of the gap between rich and the poor. The social and economic divide plays a huge role in promoting division in church and society; hence, this study seeks to search for the visible unity of the church, this *koinonia* that could play a remarkable role in renewing and transforming social contexts.

In dealing with these challenges in the world, it will mean that people should use their God-given skills to free themselves from the situations in which they find themselves. According to the discussion paper, the engagement with people of other faiths, non-governmental organisations, and government includes helping people to keep up their hope and confidence in the midst of their daily struggle for survival.<sup>15</sup> In the case of South Africa it can be mentioned that there are many churches and non-governmental organisations that are doing this upliftment of people in communities, especially in relation to poverty eradication programmes. Some of these non-governmental organisations belong to churches and they strive for partnership with government. In this regard, the National Religious Association for Social Development (NRASD) can be identified amongst many other organisations that are doing this work. The NRASD have many programmes such as Early-Childhood Development

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<sup>13</sup> See *Towards Koinonia in Faith, Life and Witness*, 1993, 8.

<sup>14</sup> With reference to the relations between church and state since the time of President Zuma, see E.M. Conradie, 2013. Notions and Forms of Ecumenicity: Some South Africa perspectives. In: *South African Perspectives on Notions and Forms of Ecumenicity*: in Ernst M. Conradie (ed.) Sun Press, Stellenbosch, 2013, 13-18.

<sup>15</sup> See *Towards Koinonia in Faith, Life and Witness*, 1993, 8.

(ECD), Religion and Public Health, National Education, and they are the Principal Recipients of the Global Fund Grant Round 9 in fighting of HIV/AIDS, Malaria and Tuberculosis.<sup>16</sup> It is evident that the churches can make a huge contribution in terms of protecting human dignity, and promoting communion and justice in society. Many churches and faith-based organisations are doing a great job with regard to the renewal of societies, shaping their identities and building consensus and *koinonia* amongst the people.

Again, it must be noted that the fifth world conference in Spain took place in a totally different ecumenical situation than that of the fourth world conference of 1963. However, this ecumenical situation is marked by both continuity and change. With regard to continuity and changes, the discussion paper notes that there is a continued transformation of relationships amongst the churches, a common commitment, and solidarity and growth of ecumenical structures on local, national and regional levels. Furthermore, in all the changes that took place, the joining of the ecumenical movement by the Roman Catholic Church during the fourth world conference in Montreal is earmarked as the biggest event in the history of the ecumenical movement.<sup>17</sup> The discussion paper states that this continued growth in the ecumenical movement became evident when many Black churches, Evangelical and Pentecostal churches in the Southern hemisphere took part in the ecumenical movement. In this way, many churches in the ecumenical movement formed relationships and started to enrich one another, whilst growing together in faith, life and witness. It is very important to also note that the communion between churches existed, but it was imperfect and full of barriers. In South Africa, for instance, the Christian churches who used to enjoy their communion and ecumenism under the auspices of the South African Council of Churches (SACC) are now striving to regain the unified voice of the church in the South African context, especially with regard to the interference of the state on religious matters, as it will be shown later in the conclusion of this study.

In this process of communion between the churches, the ecumenical movement have realised that there were new opportunities on the one hand, and problems on the other hand, which

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<sup>16</sup> For interest on the work of this non-governmental organisation, view: [www.nrasd.org.za](http://www.nrasd.org.za) [Accessed 22 May 2013]. The NRASD also hosts National Church Leaders' Consultations, where issues and challenges that confront the church and the country are discussed and a way forward to address them is reached and the voice of the church with regard to these issues and challenges is being voiced by means of Consultation Statements. To see these significant Consultation Statements by the national Church Leaders with regard to certain socio-ethical challenges in South Africa, see [www.nrasd.org.za](http://www.nrasd.org.za) [Accessed 22 May 2013].

<sup>17</sup> See *Towards Koinonia in Faith, Life and Witness*, 1993, 8-9.



hinders the process of church unity and full communion amongst the churches in the ecumenical movement. *Church and World* also highlighted similar challenges of the changing world that brought about opportunities and anxieties to many people and the church itself. Pertaining to these new opportunities, the discussion paper argues that since Montreal in 1963, a number of new independent churches in Africa, as well as in other continents have emerged. In this case, the process on justice, peace and integrity of creation (JPIC) has helped Christians and churches to recognise their common responsibility in and for today's world.<sup>18</sup> However, the discussion paper identified the lack of enthusiasm and commitment to the goal of visible unity in certain situations. The discussion paper argues that Christians and churches at times became reluctant to make an effort to do ecumenical things together. Moreover, in the ecumenical community there are theological conflicts across confessional boundaries and some churches are facing new barriers to their growing communion.<sup>19</sup> Some of these conflicts are merely caused by the differences on socio-ethical issues and by different practices with regard to the ordination of women (as discussed in the previous chapter).

It must be noted that such differences need time for reflection, interpretation, and dialogue to reach a common understanding on social and ethical issues. The ordination of women in most churches is still a bigger problem that needs attention for further dialogue. The ecumenical movement recommends the churches to also look at the crisis of authority and different structures of authority that affect ecumenical relations and dialogue.<sup>20</sup> The reason behind this idea is to reach a common understanding between the churches so that they can act and make decisions together. All these challenges and situations in the world or within the ecumenical movement require the visible unity of the church that will play a significant role in fostering meaningful *koinonia* between all the people as individuals and as groups in social contexts.

### **3.3. Towards *koinonia* in faith, life and witness – a call for the churches**

The changing of the world and ecumenical situations compel the churches to move towards a communion of visible unity in their proclamation of hope and reconciliation to humanity. According to Tutu, Jesus prayed solemnly for the unity of his followers because the credibility of his own mission depended on it. Tutu further argues that *koinonia* cannot be a

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<sup>18</sup> See *Towards Koinonia in Faith, Life and Witness*, 1993, 9.

<sup>19</sup> See *Towards Koinonia in Faith, Life and Witness*, 1993, 9-10.

<sup>20</sup> See *Towards Koinonia in Faith, Life and Witness*, 1993, 10.

matter of indifference for Christians, and we have no option but to work and pray that we might all be one.<sup>21</sup> The discussion paper argues that the idea of moving towards visible unity by the churches has been described in many statements of the WCC including the Canberra Statement of 1991, where the vision of church unity today was again described as *koinonia*.<sup>22</sup> In the Canberra Statement, the idea of *koinonia* (communion) was used to describe the unity of the church as *koinonia*, a gift and a calling, which must be fulfilled by the churches.<sup>23</sup> The Canberra Statement reveals God as the one who gathers the whole creation under the Lordship of Jesus Christ and indicates that all are brought into communion with God of all creation. This Canberra Statement forms part of the discussion paper and it further states that the church is the foretaste of this communion with God and with one another and that the Holy Spirit enables the one church to be a sign of God's rule and a servant of reconciliation. For Canberra, the calling of the church is to proclaim reconciliation and provide healing, overcome all divisions based on race, gender, age, culture, colour, and to bring all people, the entire human race, into unity with God.<sup>24</sup> It must be noted that the statement also take cognisance of the fact that many churches are divided because of sin and the misunderstanding of the diverse gifts of the Spirit.

In fact, the other main cause of these divisions amongst churches is the misuse and exercise of power (as discussed in the previous chapter under *Church and World*). Hence, the Canberra Statement also underscores the fact that the scandalous divisions damage the credibility of their witness to the world in worship and service.<sup>25</sup> Peter Lodberg echoes the words of the Canberra Statement when he states that it is in the daily conflicts of human life that the unity of the churches is tested, and the way the churches deal with the social, political and economic conflicts shows the quality of the conciliar fellowship in the church. Lodberg appeals to the church as a reconciled community in Christ to bring its members in communion, as this will help the church to become and be a trustworthy instrument of reconciliation in the world.<sup>26</sup> In fact, only when these relationships are restored and peace and

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<sup>21</sup> See Tutu, *Towards koinonia in Faith, Life and Witness*: 1994, 95-96.

<sup>22</sup> For further reading on some of these statements of the World Council of Churches Assemblies, it will be helpful to read the statements of the following WCC Assemblies: New Delhi 1961, Uppsala 1968, and Nairobi 1975. The idea of visible Church unity was clearly described and the churches were encouraged to make commitments to achieving this goal. It is in these conferences where the idea and growing desire for visible unity was discussed and emphasized as a fundamental goal to achieve.

<sup>23</sup> See *Towards Koinonia in Faith, Life and Witness*, 1993, 10-11.

<sup>24</sup> See *Towards Koinonia in Faith, Life and Witness*, 1993, 11.

<sup>25</sup> See *Towards Koinonia in Faith, Life and Witness*, 1993, 12.

<sup>26</sup> See P. Lodberg, 1995. "The History of the Ecumenical Work on the Ecclesiology and Ethics": *Ecumenical Review* Volume 47: No.2. April 1995, 132-133.

unity are achieved, only then the churches could be recognised as a sign of God's rule and hope for a reconciled community. The discussion paper observes that in the Canberra Statement the unity of the church to which we are called is a given *koinonia*. It is expressed in the common confession of apostolic faith, in a common sacramental life entered by the one baptism and celebrated together in one Eucharistic fellowship, as well as in a common mission witnessing to all people to God's grace gospel and serving the whole creation.<sup>27</sup> The church is called to live in faith, and witness to this kind of *koinonia* in order for the world to believe that Christ is the Lord and the Father is the creator of all people. One can argue that by seeing this visible unity of the church, the people will believe that unity is not an impossible mission in the world, for God lives in communion with all God's people and the rest of creation.

The discussion paper notes that the Canberra Statement further states that the Holy Spirit functions on a higher level as the promoter of *koinonia* (2 Cor. 13:13), by giving to those who are still divided the thirst and hunger for full communion. The Statement argues that we remain restless until we grow together, according to the wish and prayer of Christ for unity in John 17:21.<sup>28</sup> This refers us back to the Seoul convocation of the Life and Work in 1990, where all member churches were engaged in a conciliar process of mutual commitment to justice, peace, and the integrity of creation. It must be noted once again that at Seoul the convocation tried to maintain the interconnection between ethics and ecclesiology in its final message by introducing the concept of *kairos*, where the concerns of conciliar process and covenant were used to demonstrate the underlying intention to commit churches in a unified and binding manner to confront the life and death issues of the time. The churches were called to commit themselves to this *koinonia* in order to come together in unity, to be able to deal with ethical issues where life and death decisions need to be taken. The church must find a balance between breaking the tension between what it is (*esse*) and what it does in the world in this regard. I concur with Ernst Conradie in his article titled *Notions and Forms of Ecumenicity: Some South African perspectives*, when he argues that both ecclesiology and ethics have to engage with the realities of injustices, violence and destruction in a world that is confessed to be the triune God's beloved creation. For Conradie, where this narrative is narrowed to focus on soteriology or ecclesiology alone, ethics will suffer and where ethics is approached on the basis of social analysis alone, the transforming power of the gospel will be

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<sup>27</sup> See *Towards Koinonia in Faith, Life and Witness*, 1993, 12.

<sup>28</sup> See *Towards Koinonia in Faith, Life and Witness*, 1993, 13.

lost.<sup>29</sup> The theme of this study on church unity and social contexts seeks to keep a balance between ecclesiology and ethics in a fruitful way. The search for a biblical and theological perspective of *koinonia* will be helpful in breaking this tension between ecclesiology and ethics.

### 3.4. Towards a biblical and theological understanding of *koinonia*

The *Koinonia in Faith, in Life and Witness* discussion paper of the Santiago conference of the WCC states that the use of the notion of *koinonia* in describing the understanding of the church has reached consensus amongst bilateral and multilateral dialogues, as well as certain World Communions. The reason for this understanding is the conviction that in Christ, God united with Godself and with one another those dispersed by human sin and set against each other. In other words, all people are united in God through Christ, even in their scandalous division. The discussion paper reveals that the text of 1 John 1:3,6,7 expresses this as an interrelationship in *koinonia* that reconciles us with God, and Jesus Christ, and with one another.<sup>30</sup> According to the discussion paper, this notion of *koinonia* goes far in terms of understanding, as it helps us to acknowledge and understand Christian relationships with other faiths, as well as with creation. It also indicates that the idea expressed by the word *koinonia*, for instance in different biblical passages such as Acts 2:44; 1 Corinthians 1:9;10:16; or 2 Corinthians 6:14; 8:4, to mention but a few, is also expressed by other words; participation, partaking, sharing, fellowship, and community.<sup>31</sup> Susan Moore also echoed this variety of meanings of *koinonia* and further states that it means partnership, solidarity, and also denotes spiritual relationship and sharing of worldly goods. For Moore, in *koinonia*, unity and diversity goes together without being separated.<sup>32</sup> This simply means that unity and diversity enriches each other.

The question can be asked whether the much discussed and also much contested notion of Ubuntu<sup>33</sup> can be viewed as a parallel notion, and whether *koinonia* and Ubuntu can be

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<sup>29</sup> See E.M. Conradie, 2013. Notions and Forms of Ecumenicity: Some South Africa perspectives. In: *South African Perspectives on Notions and Forms of Ecumenicity*: in Ernst M. Conradie (ed.) Sun Press, Stellenbosch, 2013, 43.

<sup>30</sup> See *Towards Koinonia in Faith, Life and Witness*, 1993, 15.

<sup>31</sup> See *Towards Koinonia in Faith, Life and Witness*, 1993, 15.

<sup>32</sup> See S. Moore, 1995. "Towards Koinonia in Faith, Life and Witness": Theological Insights and Emphases from the Fifth World Conference on Faith and Order. *Ecumenical Review*: Volume 47: 1995, 4-6.

<sup>33</sup> Ubuntu is an African concept that is always defined as "Umntu ngumntu ngabantu" meaning "a human is a human through the others." Ubuntu has a communal meaning, not individualistic. Ubuntu also means that before

mutually enriching concepts. Later in the dissertation it will be argued that the notion of Ubuntu is also parallel to the notion of justice. It seems that the notion of Ubuntu and that of *koinonia* relates to one another significantly. When speaking of Ubuntu, it means that you do not exclude anybody in the society, but that you share with others, you live in communion with others. Hence, Ubuntu is something that comes from the heart of the human person reaching out to the other who is in need, who thirsts to be part of the existing communion of people. Just like *koinonia*, Ubuntu means that there is interdependence in the relation to each other, just as we translate the meaning of the body of Christ. As Desmond Tutu puts it when speaking of Ubuntu:

Ubuntu is the essence of being human, it declares that my humanity is caught up and inextricably bound up in yours – the Old Testament spoke of the ‘bundle’ of life.” Tutu went on to say, I am because I belong. My humanity does not depend on extraneous things, but is intrinsic to who I am. I have value because I am a person and I am judged not so much on the basis of material possessions but on spiritual attributes such as compassion, hospitality, warmth, caring about others.<sup>34</sup>

According to the discussion paper, the reality of the church as *koinonia* is intimately and correlative with faith in which in its biblical sense faith means an existential act of the human person; living in communion with God.<sup>35</sup> It can be argued that *koinonia* reflects the kind of unity we seek to achieve as the church, where all members of the body of Christ share in this fellowship, whilst participating in the transformation process of making reconciliation, peace and justice possible in the world. This dissertation will affirm this view by arguing that without reconciliation, peace and justice, there will be no *koinonia* in this world.

The discussion paper underlines that God created human beings in God’s image in such a way that they must have communion with God and with one another and above all, to look after creation.<sup>36</sup> We learn that the life of *shalom* was practised in Israel, where some of its characteristics was the commitment in defence of the weak, the orphan, the widow and the alienated people, whilst at the same time loving the neighbour, extending refuge and

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you know who you are in the community, you must first understand and recognize the people around you, then you will know who you really are in that community. Some African theologians like John Mbiti will say “*I am because we are, and since we are therefore I am*” This explains communion and fellowship even way better than *Cogito ergo sum* “I think therefore I am”.

<sup>34</sup> See Tutu, 1994. *Towards koinonia in Faith, Life and Witness*: 1994, 101.

<sup>35</sup> See *Towards Koinonia in Faith, Life and Witness*, 1993, 15.

<sup>36</sup> See *Towards Koinonia in Faith, Life and Witness*, 1993, 16.

hospitality to the prosecuted.<sup>37</sup> All these practices were to be upheld in Israel by the whole community, showing justice, righteousness and mercy to all human beings. It must be noted that this kind of life is a life of communion, where everyone is involved in the community; it is a life of solidarity and sharing whatever you have with those who do not have any. These practices in Israel clearly points out to the whole humanity why communion is so important. Again, in this communion between God and God's people, including the whole of creation, the discussion paper strongly emphasises the faithfulness of God to the people on both occasions; when they were faithful and when they turned away.<sup>38</sup> What this brings to attention is that people must remain faithful and trustworthy to God and to one another in the life of communion. It can be argued that in as much as the discussion paper emphasises the faithfulness of God to people, some significant questions of trust in God in times of misery, of poverty, of death and many other life challenges are constantly asked.

The discussion paper further highlights that the Christian community was led to believe that God sent God's Son Jesus Christ to bring the hope of communion for each individual, for all people and in relation to all creation.<sup>39</sup> During his ministry, Jesus reached out to the poor, the downtrodden; the most vulnerable and to those excluded by the community, and he reached out to them by means of communion. The discussion paper echoed *Church and World* by stating that through communion with God, in God we already enjoy what is the heart of the kingdom still to come in fullness and glory and that the church is the foretaste of this kingdom.<sup>40</sup> It must be noted that the Christian community is encouraged to live this life of *koinonia* that reflects the essence of life in God's kingdom. In relation to this study, because of this life of *koinonia*, the church is therefore encouraged in its witness and service to embrace this *koinonia* in the world. By doing this as part of the unity of the church, this *koinonia* will influence the life of communion in social contexts.

The strongest part of the communion between the Father and the Son was revealed in his obedience when he suffered the death of the cross, whilst at the same time the power of the Holy Spirit was working in him. The discussion paper affirms: "Through the power of the Holy Spirit those who are baptised die with Christ and rise to new life in him, and thus joined

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<sup>37</sup> See *Towards Koinonia in Faith, Life and Witness*, 1993, 16.

<sup>38</sup> See *Towards Koinonia in Faith, Life and Witness*, 1993, 16.

<sup>39</sup> See *Towards Koinonia in Faith, Life and Witness*, 1993, 16-17.

<sup>40</sup> See *Towards Koinonia in Faith, Life and Witness*, 1993, 17.

to the Father (cf. Romans. 6:4-5).<sup>41</sup> In this way, *koinonia* signifies and expresses our relationship with God based upon our participation in the reality of God's own everlasting life. Nico Koopman sees this significance of *koinonia* in terms of the vulnerability of the triune God and the vulnerable church. Koopman writes:

The vulnerability of God is manifested in the relations of interdependence between Father, Son and Spirit. It reaches its culmination point in the cross of Jesus Christ, and it comes to expression in the compassion, sympathy, concern, and solidarity of the triune God with a suffering world. The vulnerable church came into being through her election, calling, justification, and sanctification by the vulnerable triune God....the church consists of vulnerable human beings. Vulnerability is part of the essence of being human.<sup>42</sup>

The discussion paper also states that this *koinonia* can be described in expressions, words and images. These expressions, images and words are like "holy nation" and "God's people" in 1 Peter 2:9-10, "God's temple" in 1 Corinthians 3:16-17, and "body of Christ" in 1 Corinthians 12:27, all express a relationship with God, and especially with Christ, referring to the participation in the Trinitarian life of God, says the discussion paper.<sup>43</sup> The relationship between God and believers and amongst believers themselves is expressed by *koinonia*, which is described with other words as being "in Christ" in 2 Corinthians 5:17, as well as Christ living inside the believers through the Holy Spirit in Romans 8:1-11.<sup>44</sup> The Holy Spirit plays a fundamental role in the communion between God and believers and amongst believers themselves. The Holy Spirit that believers accept binds them together with God, and this relationship does not get easily broken.

The sacraments of Baptism and the Eucharist play a prominent role in expressing and signifying this communion. In baptism, as mentioned earlier, we become one with Christ and with one another, hearing the Word of God together in faith, whilst partaking in the Lord's Supper and becoming one body in Christ. This unfolds our relationship with God through Christ, a communion that is celebrated and everlasting. The discussion paper argues that in Acts 2:42, *koinonia* is used as an expression of how the community is nurtured and lives

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<sup>41</sup> See *Towards Koinonia in Faith, Life and Witness*, 1993, 17.

<sup>42</sup> See N. Koopman, 2008. "Vulnerable Church in a vulnerable world?" In: Eddy Van der Borgh (ed.) *Journal of Reformed Theology* 2, Volume 2. No.3, 2008, 243-244.

<sup>43</sup> See *Towards Koinonia in Faith, Life and Witness*, 1993, 17.

<sup>44</sup> See *Towards Koinonia in Faith, Life and Witness*, 1993, 17-18.



together. The community breaks the bread and perseveres in prayer and communion. When they share things equally and all receive in common, they ensure that each member of the community has their basic needs fulfilled. The discussion paper further states that in this way, *koinonia* is the sharing and re-distribution of resources for the survival of everyone in the community.<sup>45</sup> One can argue that the sharing of the Eucharist is akin to this *koinonia* and the quest for the visible unity of the church on the one hand, and the sharing of things equally as a means of showing the significance and the practical implications of this unity in social contexts on the other hand. It must be noted that the partaking in the Eucharist, the sharing of the bread equally also symbolises justice in action and reconciliation of the people within this communion. Injustices, corruption, and discrimination are radically challenged in the Lord's Supper.

In the communion with Christ and with one another, sharing of resources equally in the community plays a fundamental role in signifying the need for *koinonia*. The sacraments symbolise this sharing as an important aspect of *koinonia*. This is what the Lord's Supper teaches us, the living *koinonia*. The Lutheran theologian John Reumann, who was one of the participants during the fifth world conference on *koinonia*, argues strongly for the notion of *koinonia* that is reflected in the Eucharist. Reumann cites Paul, saying: "The bread which we break is participation (or sharing, *koinonia*) in the body of Christ. The cup of blessing over which we say a blessing (to God) he says, is a participation (or sharing, *koinonia*) in the blood of Christ."<sup>46</sup> For Reumann, *koinonia* is the operative word, the participation in the one loaf of bread. He further notes that Paul's first letter to the Corinthians (see 1 Cor. 10:16)<sup>47</sup> moves the *koinonia* theme in the direction of a Eucharistic emphasis, but in the service of unity in the face of divisions. This focus on the Eucharistic emphasis is done on the basis of common participation in the same Lord who died for all and who now adversely judges contempt against the poor (11:22) and failure to live with sensitivity in Christian love and freedom (10:25-32).<sup>48</sup> It becomes evident that the Eucharist is a vital symbol for the visible unity of the church we seek. The sharing of the Eucharist even spreads down to the poor people on the margins of society. One can argue that the meaning of the Eucharist as discussed here by

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<sup>45</sup> See *Towards Koinonia in Faith, Life and Witness*, 1993, 18.

<sup>46</sup> See J. Reumann, 1994. "Koinonia in Scripture: Survey of Biblical texts". In: *On the way to Fuller Koinonia: Official Report of the Fifth World Conference on Faith and Order*, Thomas F. Best and Günther Gassmann (eds.), Faith and Order Paper no. 166, WCC, Geneva, 1994, 43.

<sup>47</sup> See 1 Corinthians 10:16: "Is not the cup of thanksgiving for which we give thanks a participation in the blood of Christ? And is not the bread that we break a participation in the body of Christ?"

<sup>48</sup> See Reumann, *Koinonia in Scripture: Survey of Biblical texts*, 1994, 44.



Reumann and the discussion paper radically challenges the infamous decision of the Dutch Reformed Church (DRC) 1857 Synod that excluded people of colour and Black people from sharing the Eucharist with the White congregants. This 1857 Synod decision will be discussed later in chapter five of this study, where this decision opened the door for the exclusion from the Eucharist, but also to physical exclusion of Coloureds and Black people from the White congregations.<sup>49</sup>

The question can be asked as to what the practical implications of the Lord's Supper and its teaching for social contexts are. Can the meaning of the Lord's Supper help society to live in unity and in communion? Can the church, by means of the Lord's Supper, help not only to teach society about the sharing of goods equally, but also to teach and promote the life of discipleship and morally good citizenship? According to the discussion paper, this communion calls us to discipleship, partaking in Christ's suffering and taking his example. It also means that we should have a sense of justice and compassion, sharing our joys, sorrows and suffering with one another. This communion calls us to struggle for truth, serving one another in love and mutual receiving and giving of material and spiritual gifts, whilst caring for the harmony of God's creation. Lastly, when the time has come, we will share in God's glory already anticipated in the celebration of the liturgy, where we unite in the life, death and resurrection of Jesus Christ.<sup>50</sup>

The discussion paper states that this communion is fully realised by the Holy Spirit in the church, as the church reflects a community of the disciples of Christ, established by a baptism inseparable from faith and *metanoia*, in a common life in Christ.<sup>51</sup> The disciples of Christ are one and enriched by their diversity as a gift from God. Churches are called by God to be a communion that is empowered, sustained and guided by the Holy Spirit to be fully united and respectful of this diversity in all levels. The discussion paper warns us not to confuse diversity with division. It clearly explains that diversity is not the same as division. Divisions within the church are overcome as Christ brings Christians into a reconciled and reconciling community with himself as God's gift of communion. However, for the discussion paper,

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<sup>49</sup> See Hermann Giliomee, 2003:2.83, 'The Weakness of Some': The Dutch Reformed Church and White Supremacy, in *Scriptura International Journal of Bible, Religion and Theology in Southern Africa*, 2003, 212-244. See also J.C. Adonis, 1982. *Die afgebreekte skeidsmuur weer opgebou: Die verstrengeling van die sendingbeleid van die Nederduitse Gereformeerde Kerk in Suid – Afrika met die praktyk en ideologie van die apartheid in historiese perspektief*, Editions Rodopi B.V, Amsterdam 1982. Netherlands. 1982, 1-231.

<sup>50</sup> See *Towards Koinonia in Faith, Life and Witness*, 1993, 18-19.

<sup>51</sup> See *Towards Koinonia in Faith, Life and Witness*, 1993, 19.

communion is also a calling that it is not fully realised in this world and is often distracted by human sin, division and discrimination.<sup>52</sup> It can be argued that division has no place in the kingdom of God. Churches must strive for visible unity that celebrates the diversity of people.

The calling of the church is to be in the realm of spiritual life and it must commit itself to the service for the reconciliation of humanity and creation. The discussion paper argues that the scope of the church's *koinonia* is very complex and has no limitations. As the discussion paper puts it:

The church as *koinonia* is called to share not only in the suffering of its own community, but in the suffering of all; by advocacy and care for the poor, needy and marginalised; by joining in all efforts for justice and peace within human societies; by exercising and promoting responsible stewardship of creation and by keeping alive hope in the heart of humanity.<sup>53</sup>

In order for the church to fulfil this task and calling, it requires the empowerment through the Holy Spirit. In the exercise of *diakonia*, Christians are called to join with all people of goodwill expressing the same moral aims.

The discussion paper suggests that service (*diakonia*) and communion (*koinonia*) must be held together; they cannot be separated, for the church's calling to *koinonia* involves service to the whole world and Christians must be hands on in executing God's plan and service to the needy. It must be noted that *Church and World* makes similar remarks (as indicated in the previous chapter), stating that the unity of the church, its witness and service in the world cannot be separated. *Church and World* further explored the inter-relation between the unity of the church and its calling to witness and service. However, *Church and World* further said that this struggle for unity is not for sake of the church alone, but also for the sake of the world. According to the discussion paper, Christians need to be faithful to the vocation of *diakonia*; they need constant repentance, not only once, and they need renewal because of human sin that is always present, causing division and disorder within humanity, as well as in the community of disciples.<sup>54</sup> The discussion paper also warns us that the danger to the exercise of *diakonia* is that the powers of evil are still at work within the world, within the

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<sup>52</sup> See *Towards Koinonia in Faith, Life and Witness*, 1993, 19.

<sup>53</sup> See *Towards Koinonia in Faith, Life and Witness*, 1993, 20.

<sup>54</sup> See *Towards Koinonia in Faith, Life and Witness*, 1993, 20.

Christian community and in its members, until the last enemy is destroyed (1 Cor.15:25).<sup>55</sup> The reality of the powers of evil to the exercise of *diakonia* can be witnessed with regard to corruption of people within churches and government. In South Africa especially, corruption creates tensions, distrust and disaster in social service delivery by government.

The discussion paper states that human sin corrupts the whole creation; hence, communion with God is not to be considered simply as an affair of personal relation with God, it also involves the responsibility of humanity for creation.<sup>56</sup> Thus, the church cannot stand aloof from the destiny of the whole universe with Jesus as the Lord of cosmos. It must be understood that the church is called for care and responsibility towards creation and humanity as a way of expressing its communion with God who creates and protects God's creation. Gennadios Limouris speaks of our faith as a way of life that draws us near to God. This way of life includes every organic function of growth and maturity. Limouris writes:

It is the way which forms the relationship with human community, with our neighbours, with the people of other faiths and traditions, with the whole creation and the entire humanity, the cosmos of creation.<sup>57</sup>

Hence, the church lives this *koinonia* and being faithful to service, whilst it also lives as a prophetic sign of the kingdom of God, pointing beyond itself to the everlasting life of the kingdom of God, the mystery of God and God's plan for all people.<sup>58</sup> The church lives this *koinonia* in faith, life and whilst in its witness it renders service to the world.

### **3.5. Towards *koinonia* in faith – Confessing the One Faith**

The statements of the WCC Assemblies had emphasised the importance of the common confession of the one apostolic faith as an important tool for Christian identity and as an essential condition and expression for the kind of church unity we seek. Since the Faith and Order Commission meeting in Bangalore in 1978, their endeavour was to make it possible for the church to confess and express its faith in common. Their work concentrated on *Towards*

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<sup>55</sup> See *Towards Koinonia in Faith, Life and Witness*, 1993, 20.

<sup>56</sup> See *Towards Koinonia in Faith, Life and Witness*, 1993, 20.

<sup>57</sup> See G. Limouris, 1993. "Being as Koinonia in Faith: Challenges, Visions and Hopes for the Unity of the Church Today", *Ecumenical Review*, Volume 45, number 1, January 1993, 81.

<sup>58</sup> See *Towards Koinonia in Faith, Life and Witness*, 1993, 21.

*the common expression of the apostolic faith today.*<sup>59</sup> The discussion paper recognises that there are occasions where this faith is confessed together, and this must be strengthened, guided carefully, and done on a regular basis for the communion growth.

The ecumenical conversations also came to the conclusion that the communion to which we are called as believers requires us to confess and celebrate the apostolic faith in word and in life for God's glory and for the sake of the world God so loves. As the discussion paper puts it:

We are called to confess and celebrate the one faith, rooted in the witness of the people Hebrew Scriptures and in the testimony of the faith and mission of those who proclaimed the Gospel of Jesus Christ.<sup>60</sup>

In this faith, God binds us together as a caring God, the Father of the eternal Son, and the creator and sustainer of the entire universe. I will now turn my attention to key inter-related issues the church needs to pay attention to, namely, respectively confessing, celebrating and living the apostolic faith.

### 3.5.1. Confessing, celebrating and living the apostolic faith

There is an inter-relation between confessing, celebrating and living the apostolic faith. The confession of faith demands a faithful living and celebration by the Christian community that confesses the divine power of the triune God. According to the discussion paper, when we confess that God is the creator of all, this means a life attentive to the goodness and preservation of creation. When we confess the One, Holy, Catholic and Apostolic Church, it means that we must be dedicated to working towards visible church unity. When we confess the belief in women and men as created in the image of God (*Imago Dei*), this challenges us to live this out accordingly in the community of women and men in the church.<sup>61</sup> In line with the discussion paper, the Belhar Confession's expression of the belief in the one, holy, universal Christian church, the communion of saints from the entire human family, demands

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<sup>59</sup> A study was developed by the Faith and Order Commission of the World Council of Churches under this theme on three interrelated aspects: Common explication, mutual recognition and common confession of the apostolic faith. The Nicene-Constantinopolitan Creed was used as a focus of the faith grounded in Holy Scripture and a faith in which the Church is called to confess afresh today. See *Towards Koinonia in Faith, Life and Witness*, 1993, 23.

<sup>60</sup> See *Towards Koinonia in Faith, Life and Witness*, 1993, 23.

<sup>61</sup> See *Towards Koinonia in Faith, Life and Witness*, 1993, 23-24.

us to live and celebrate our diverse life irrespective of race and gender.<sup>62</sup> Belhar also contends for the visible unity of the church that is totally inclusive, where each member of the Christian family depends on the other. The equal status of being a human being created in God's image, irrespective of our gender, must be lived in and be witnessed in a community of women and men. Limouris concretises this argument by stating that the church is a body of communion, in which the members live, not each one for him or herself, but each one in an organic unity of love (faith and confession – my emphasis) with the rest of the members and with the head of the body, Christ.<sup>63</sup>

The discussion paper states that if these issues are held together in our expression of *koinonia* in apostolic life, we will in this way be glorifying God, and healing and renewing the broken human community.<sup>64</sup> In the apostolic faith and life, God draws us into communion with God as God and with one another as co-responsible persons and this communion in apostolic faith and life embraces both a personal and corporate dimension. As discussed in the previous chapter, the reality is that the issue of gender in churches still demands more attention. This also points to the fact that some Christians still confess the apostolic faith and other confessions such as Belhar without living out what they confess to be the truth of the gospel. This provokes some questions on how we celebrate the confession of faith without living its demands. How do we celebrate our diversity and the image of God in us as women and men if we do not show this in our lives? The discussion paper underscores that through the ecumenical dialogues, the Nicene Constantinopolitan Creed is recognised as a central expression of the apostolic faith.<sup>65</sup> The use of this confession by many churches when confessing and praising God is also an expression of continuity over time and communion with fellow Christians.

### 3.5.2. The various forms of expressing the One Apostolic Faith

The church is regarded as a confessing communion of the one faith in many and diverse cultural, social and religious contexts. In this communion, we rejoice in the ecumenical convergence that the One, Apostolic Church is also catholic.<sup>66</sup> However, the discussion paper

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<sup>62</sup> See J. Botha and P. Naudé, 2011. "Belhar – a staff to lean on today and tomorrow": In J. Botha and P. Naudé, *Good News to Confess: The Belhar Confession and the road of acceptance*, Bible Media, Wellington, 2011, 69.

<sup>63</sup> See Limouris, *Being as Koinonia in Faith*: 1993, 81.

<sup>64</sup> See *Towards Koinonia in Faith, Life and Witness*, 1993, 24.

<sup>65</sup> See *Towards Koinonia in Faith, Life and Witness*, 1993, 25.

<sup>66</sup> See *Towards Koinonia in Faith, Life and Witness*, 1993, 26.

warns us not to regard the need to interpret, live, confess, and even celebrate the one faith in many contexts in different forms of expression as a threat to church unity, but this should be regarded as the incarnation character of the Christian faith.<sup>67</sup> In line with the discussion paper, Limouris helps us to remember that in Christ we are already united in many forms and actions, in spite of the conflicting multiplicity of churches. Limouris argues that the unity-communion of the church is a unity of faith and that all the churches, irrespective of their disagreements, acknowledge the One Lord, and believe in the One Spirit, and the One Father. In Christ, all churches possess the one Gospel, the Good News, however differently they may interpret it, Limouris concludes.<sup>68</sup>

However, I want to argue that it is always possible that when Christians express the one apostolic faith in their diversity, a conflict and division occur and at times it hampers the existing communion. The ways in which Christians interpret the confession at times leads to conflict. There must be some ways of keeping this communion in shape and existence, whilst finding ways of holding together these diverse expressions. The discussion paper further states that the churches within the ecumenical movement are encouraged to maintain and deepen the existing communion in apostolic faith and life, which they have already achieved by looking together at ways of expressing this faith in diversity in their witness to the world. It is this communion that will make the churches stronger to face the challenges in social contexts. This study on church unity and social contexts is an attempt to look at the role of this *koinonia* in faith in which its implications in terms of witness goes beyond the boundaries of the church, to social contexts.

### 3.5.3 The discernment of our common faith

There are different ways and instruments used by churches today for discerning and even teaching the one faith in deciding what is and not part of the faith of the church through the ages as well as its significance for today. The churches within the ecumenical movement also have differences and challenges to discuss thoroughly and seek agreement on questions pertaining to decision making and authoritative teaching as they move closer to mutual recognition, the discussion paper says.<sup>69</sup> The German systematic theologian Wolfhart Pannenberg's contribution to confessing our common faith, irrespective of our differences, at

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<sup>67</sup> See *Towards Koinonia in Faith, Life and Witness*, 1993, 26. See also S. Moore, "Towards Koinonia in Faith, Life and Witness" 1995, 8-9.

<sup>68</sup> See Limouris *Being as Koinonia in Faith*: 1993, 82-83.

<sup>69</sup> See *Towards Koinonia in Faith, Life and Witness*, 1993, 27.

the fifth world conference of Faith and Order is very helpful in this regard. Pannenberg argues that the communion with the one Lord, which we enjoy through our faith in God, unites us within the one body of God's church across all our divisions.<sup>70</sup> For Pannenberg, the unity of faith does not exclude differences in the form of expressing its affirmations and in the theological interpretation of its content. Pannenberg strongly argues that the restoration of Christian unity is both necessary and possible on the basis of our common faith in the one Lord.<sup>71</sup> One can argue that our common faith and communion with God is not only tested by doctrinal differences, but also by our differences on ethical issues. The challenge is on how we pull these together without compromising our common faith.

The discussion paper underscores that the catholicity of the church requires communion and the partaking of all local churches to be held together by faith, baptism, Eucharist, ministry, and also by common bonds or structures. In this way, the discussion paper states that the fullness of Christian faith and life is available in each and all places.<sup>72</sup> Churches should strive to work towards fulfilling the role they can play together in decision making and teaching the one faith in a manner that will suit all.

### **3.6. Towards *Koinonia* in Life – Sharing a common life in Christ**

The discussion paper furthermore emphasises that the common life of all who believe in Christ crucified and risen is mainly rooted in the preaching of the Word of God and in the celebration of the sacraments; by doing so we are called to live this common life for God's glory.<sup>73</sup> Dorothy Lee, one of the participants at the fifth world conference of Faith and Order, uses the example of the anointing story at Bethany (John 12:1-8) in her description of *koinonia* in life. From this story, Lee sees *koinonia* operating in the following three ways; *koinonia* as gratitude for life, *koinonia* as cross-shaped, and *koinonia* as costly love.<sup>74</sup> Lee states that *koinonia* begins in gratitude for Jesus' gift of life and that the picture of Jesus giving life is relevant for us today. She argues that the Christian community is also broken

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<sup>70</sup> See W. Pannenberg, 1994. "Communion in Faith": In: *On the way to Fuller Koinonia: Official Report of the Fifth World Conference on Faith and Order*, Thomas F. Best and Günther Gassmann (eds.), Faith and Order Paper no. 166, WCC, Geneva, 1994, 112.

<sup>71</sup> See Pannenberg, *Communion in Faith*, 1994, 113-114.

<sup>72</sup> See *Towards Koinonia in Faith, Life and Witness*, 1993, 27.

<sup>73</sup> See *Towards Koinonia in Faith, Life and Witness*, 1993, 29.

<sup>74</sup> See D. Lee, 1994. "A Vision of Koinonia: The Anointing at Bethany John 12:1-8". In: *On the way to Fuller Koinonia: Official Report of the Fifth World Conference on Faith and Order*, Thomas F. Best and Günther Gassmann (eds.), Faith and Order Paper no. 166, WCC, Geneva, 1994, 81-84.



and surrounded by symbols of death, namely sin and alienation, by injustice and intolerance, by grief and pain. As Christ's disciples, we have been given life in baptism, yet our struggle remains, Lee says.<sup>75</sup> For Lee, this gift of life, this *koinonia* is linked profoundly to Jesus' death and that the gift of unity comes at a great cost, which was the giving of God's beloved Son to death. Lee further argues that the cross prevents our *koinonia* being superficial and that through the cross we face the sin of our division and are reminded of how vulnerable we are. *Koinonia* calls for a response, both from us as individuals and as the church. This *koinonia* is also based on the reciprocal love between us and God, and between churches.<sup>76</sup> It is evident that *koinonia* does have costly implications, especially when dealing with issues of peace and justice. The unresolved differences, tensions and divisions are just giving testimony to the vulnerability of our communion.

The discussion paper takes cognisance that there are some barriers holding us back from living and sharing this common life in Christ. However, the Faith and Order Commission had made some reflections on these barriers when they focused on Baptism, Eucharist, and Ministry (BEM) in the document produced at Lima in 1982.<sup>77</sup> However, the discussion paper outlines four significant aspects of sharing a common life in Christ, namely the foundation of our common life, sacramental life, ministerial life, and the practice of common life.

Firstly, the discussion paper clearly points out that there is no other foundation of our common life other than the one God in whom we believe and trust; for such a conviction, we believe that life itself is a gift from this one God. The love of God to us was shown through Jesus Christ who was sent to us, whom through his life, passion and resurrection revealed his Father's love to us.<sup>78</sup> This simply points to the fact that through Christ we have a common life in the Triune God. The church is therefore challenged in its unique calling to live out this *koinonia* in the preaching of the Word and in the celebration of the sacraments in faith, life and in its witness in the world. One can argue that this communion must be practical and the church is being challenged to live this communion and common life in Christ. Living a sacramental life that presents God's love and care for His creation in this world remains the biggest challenge for the Christian community.

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<sup>75</sup> See Lee, *A Vision of Koinonia*: 1994. 82.

<sup>76</sup> See Lee, *A Vision of Koinonia*: 1994. 82-84.

<sup>77</sup> See *Towards Koinonia in Faith, Life and Witness*, 1993, 29.

<sup>78</sup> See *Towards Koinonia in Faith, Life and Witness*, 1993, 29.



Secondly, the discussion paper reveals that the convergence in our understanding of baptism, especially the common affirmation of baptism as incorporation into the common life in Christ, can be ascribed as the most positive element towards *koinonia* and the convergence in our understanding of the Eucharist is to be celebrated.<sup>79</sup> Baptism and Eucharist are therefore tightly connected to the life of the church. The Dutch ecumenist Martien Brinkman argues that the church is a sacrament as the body of Christ and as the temple of the Holy Spirit. The Spirit lets us participate in the salvific work of Christ. Brinkman further points out that even Vatican II calls the church a sacrament because of its role as a unifying symbol. In the unity of the church the divine destination for the whole of humanity becomes manifest. The church as sacrament is the symbol of that one destination.<sup>80</sup> In this way the significance of church unity for social contexts becomes more visible. Our common life in Christ means that the church is conformed to him by words and deeds.

In line with Brinkman, Miguel Garijo-Guembe convincingly argues that the sacraments bring forward and disclose the essence of the church. The church has its historical origin in the *acta et passa Christi in carne*, in the Last Supper, and came to reality in the gift of the Holy Spirit at Pentecost.<sup>81</sup> For this reason, Garijo-Guembe argues that the Eucharist is the sacrament of sacraments and it is simultaneously the presentation of the church. For Garijo-Guembe, the church is an ongoing Eucharistic *koinonia*. However, churches are urged to solve the questions related to the conceptions of the relationship of baptism to faith, the action of the Holy Spirit and membership of the church in order to move towards *koinonia* and mutual recognition of the one baptism.<sup>82</sup> This is also the case with regard to the Eucharist. The discussion paper underscores that in the ecumenical relations there is a great pain caused by the limited character of our Eucharistic unity. Amongst other churches there are still serious obstacles with regard to full Eucharistic communion, whilst other churches enjoy the sharing of the Eucharist.

The discussion paper notes that the obstacles to sharing the Eucharist work against the conviction that the Eucharist communion is the ultimate expression of full agreement and communion in faith and life, whilst on the other hand, the Eucharist sharing is considered a

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<sup>79</sup> See *Towards Koinonia in Faith, Life and Witness*, 1993, 30.

<sup>80</sup> See Martien Brinkman, 1999. *Sacraments of Freedom: Ecumenical Essays on Creation and Sacrament – Justification and Freedom*. Meinema Zoetermeer, the Netherlands, 1999, 78-83.

<sup>81</sup> See M. M. Garijo-Guembe, 1994. *Communion of the Saints: Foundation, Nature, and Structure of the Church*. The Liturgical Press, Collegeville, Minnesota, USA, 1994, 88-94.

<sup>82</sup> See *Towards Koinonia in Faith, Life and Witness*, 1993, 30.

legitimate expression of the partial communion we already experience.<sup>83</sup> During the celebration of the Lord's Supper, we celebrate the death and resurrection of Christ present amongst us, the unity in Christ, redemption and sanctification, we pray for the gift of the Holy Spirit, we receive the forgiveness of sins and we are brought together as a reconciled and reconciling community, and celebrate the meal in anticipation of a new heaven and earth, the discussion paper says.<sup>84</sup> In addition to these aspects, it must also be noted that in the celebration of the Lord's Supper we experience the healing of our brokenness, the sharing of our pain as we cry together for healing and redemption, and above all, we feel the presence of the Lord in our midst.

Brinkman argues that the Eucharist as sacrament of communion is real food for scattered people in their social struggle, to heal the brokenness of human existence. In this way, Brinkman argues that the church shares the real bread of life. Brinkman further argues that mediating signs of reconciliation sacraments are at the same time functioning as symbols of protest serving to unmask the life that is not yet reconciled.<sup>85</sup> For Brinkman, the sacraments of baptism and of the Lord's Supper allow us to participate in a life dominated by renewal, forgiveness and redemption, instead of by rigidity, bitterness and subjugation. Brinkman pleads for a need for an ethic of baptism and the Lord's Supper. He is convinced that in such an ethic the sacrament will be at the centre of many ethical questions, such as the value of individual life.<sup>86</sup> When looking at the significance of church unity in social contexts one can indeed argue that the Eucharist can play a vital role as the unifying factor and it also addresses the socio-ethical challenges pertaining to the common life in Christ.

Thirdly, according to the ecumenical convergence, ecclesial ministry should be approached in terms of our shared baptism, which enables the whole people of God to share in Christ's ministry.<sup>87</sup> The discussion paper states that for Christians, all church ministries need to be seen and understood as service and the church should live according to the Word of God. However, the discussion paper takes cognisance that there are some serious disagreements that keep on dividing the churches pertaining to understanding and practices of ordained ministry. These disagreements relate to questions on the way in which ordination can be

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<sup>83</sup> See *Towards Koinonia in Faith, Life and Witness*, 1993, 30-31.

<sup>84</sup> See *Towards Koinonia in Faith, Life and Witness*, 1993, 31.

<sup>85</sup> See Brinkman, *Sacraments of Freedom*, 1999, 85.

<sup>86</sup> See Brinkman, *Sacraments of Freedom*, 1999, 93-100.

<sup>87</sup> See *Towards Koinonia in Faith, Life and Witness*, 1993, 31.

viewed as sacramental, presidency at the Eucharist celebration, the ordination of women, and Episcopal succession. However, the general agreement amongst the churches of the ecumenical movement is that it is Christ who invites to the meal and who presides at it.<sup>88</sup>

The discussion paper also notes that in most cases, disagreement arises when seeking to determine who can lead the Eucharist celebration. In most cases, churches will use an ordained minister to lead the Eucharist celebration and some have even suggested that under special circumstances and conditions, a non-ordained person may act as presiding minister, given that Christ is the one who invites. It must be noted that these disagreements could easily bring tension and division amongst the churches. A consensus must be reached pertaining to these disagreements in order to enjoy full communion in the ministerial life. The discussion paper argues that different decision pertaining to women's ordination<sup>89</sup> and respect for such decisions should not hinder us from struggling with this issue and setting it into the broader level of the role and place of men and women in the ministries of the church with ordained ministry included.

The issue of the ordination of women could also become a dividing issue in the future if attention and discussion around it are not taken seriously. Again, we should understand what it means to be created in the image of God, male and female, as well as receiving the gifts of the Holy Spirit. Hence, *Church and World* brought this discussion to the fore in the previous chapter under the theme on the community of women and men. *Church and World* strives to explore ways in which an authentic community of women and men could be realised. The discussion paper urges the churches to do serious theological reflection on these issues of disagreement relating to presidency at the Eucharist, women's ordination, Episcopal succession and structure. All of these issues need consideration and resolutions must be taken. It must be noted that taking concrete decisions in relation to these issues will result in a positive movement towards fuller *koinonia* and recognition of ordained ministries. It must be noted that these are serious and sensitive issues that can destroy the real meaning of our common life in Christ. These issues also directly relate to the significant role that church unity

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<sup>88</sup> See *Towards Koinonia in Faith, Life and Witness*, 1993, 31.

<sup>89</sup> For further reading on the issue of the ordination of women, one can also read Rahner's perspective with regard to the ordination of women in the Catholic Church. See Jerry T. Farmer, 1993. *Ministry in Community: Rahner's vision of Ministry*. Louvain – Theological and Pastoral Monographs 13, 1993, 191-194. See also, *Ordination of Women in Ecumenical Perspective*, Faith and Order Paper No. 105. Church members in local congregations and also in the ecumenical movement should come to a full understanding and recognition of the role, responsibilities and dignity of women as ministers in the Church.

can play in social contexts. It can be argued that if the church does not get this right, it will also mean that our ministerial life will play an insignificant role in the world.

Fourthly, the discussion paper emphasises that our common life in Christ is shared not merely when we assemble together in prayer, but in all areas of our existence, such as sharing the pain because of our divisions.<sup>90</sup> For the discussion paper, sharing a common life in Christ means that we become enriched every time when we justly share with one another our spiritual and material resources, recognising that we are all givers and receivers. Regarding the spiritual sharing of our common life in Christ, Wallace Alston argues that when we confess our faith by means of the Apostles' Creed, we actually say: "I believe in the communion of saints." In a sense, we believe that the communion of saints exists. According to Alston, the communion of saints is something that we must pray for as Christians, something that always comes as a gift of God to us, and something for which we must be profoundly grateful.<sup>91</sup> This common life in Christ becomes enriched when we celebrate the gifts of others and helping them to offer what they are gifted with in service of the church and society. Our common life in Christ becomes a model and an example for others, especially when it becomes more inclusive in its form.

The discussion paper further notes that in the common Christian life each believer, as well as all the churches, strives to express more adequately to the world the *koinonia* to which we are called, so as to give a credible witness to all people.<sup>92</sup> The witness that we are to carry out involves obedience that may lead to suffering and in this case, Jesus Christ becomes our perfect model. Jesus Christ became obedient until the point of his death on the cross (Phil.2:8). The witness that we are called to requires the church to express it in words, deeds, and life for the sake of our solidarity with the poor and the suffering, and that the martyrs should be our inspiration in this regard.<sup>93</sup> The ecumenical movement is grateful for the many expressions of *koinonia* that already exist amongst churches and they need to be strengthened. Amongst the expressions that deserve special attention according to the discussion paper, can be seen in inter-confessional marriages and the joint theological education and ecumenical formation, which need to be encouraged. The discussion paper argues that in all our efforts

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<sup>90</sup> See *Towards Koinonia in Faith, Life and Witness*, 1993, 33.

<sup>91</sup> See W. M. Alston Jr. 2002. *The Church of the Living God: A Reformed Perspective*. Westminster John Knox, Louisville, 2002, 42-44.

<sup>92</sup> See *Towards Koinonia in Faith, Life and Witness*, 1993, 33.

<sup>93</sup> See *Towards Koinonia in Faith, Life and Witness*, 1993, 33.

we are to be guided by the “Lund Principle”, which states: “Should not our churches ... act together in all matters except those in which deep differences of conviction compel them to act separately?”<sup>94</sup> It must be noted that this Lund principle becomes a key for the effectiveness of ecumenism, especially with regard to working relations between churches, the people of other faiths and non-faith people. The key here is our *koinonia* in life and witness.

### **3.7. Towards *Koinonia* in witness – Called to common witness**

There interrelation between *koinonia* in life, faith and witness points to the fact that *koinonia* in the apostolic faith and in sacramental life implies and presupposes a witnessing community.<sup>95</sup> The Christian community is enabled and empowered by the Holy Spirit to witness about the work of Jesus Christ and who he is for us today in this world. The discussion paper asserts that at Pentecost the Holy Spirit empowered the disciples of Christ to manifest their *koinonia* with God in acts of living witness. The discussion paper also explores the five following aspects connected to witness; church and humanity in the perspective of the kingdom, common witness in mission and evangelism, common witness in dialogue with people of other living faiths, common witness to the values of the kingdom and common witness in the care of creation.<sup>96</sup>

The reason for these aspects is their engagement with the authentic life of Christians and the relationship to others who are not Christians. The discussion paper convincingly argues that all realisations of visible unity between the churches entail the renewal of broken relationships between members of the church, as well as work for renewal, justice and peace in the world.<sup>97</sup> In this way the discussion paper reveals the significance of the visible unity of the church towards social contexts, especially the role of the church towards reconciliation and justice issues. This common witness implies working together towards renewal of human community.

Firstly, with regard to church and humanity, the discussion paper states that in the kingdom of God, the church, cosmos and the whole of humanity have a certain goal; hence, they must be

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<sup>94</sup> See *Towards Koinonia in Faith, Life and Witness*, 1993, 34.

<sup>95</sup> See *Towards Koinonia in Faith, Life and Witness*, 1993, 35.

<sup>96</sup> See *Towards Koinonia in Faith, Life and Witness*, 1993, 35-43.

<sup>97</sup> See *Towards Koinonia in Faith, Life and Witness*, 1993, 35.

seen in the perspective of the kingdom. The discussion paper further states that the life and ministry, death and resurrection of Jesus the Son of God has brought to us God's rule with its promise for salvation, reconciliation and renewal of the whole humanity and creation. In this regard, the church is seen as that part of humanity that has been led to fully affirm the liberating truth of the kingdom for all people.<sup>98</sup> However, the church is affected and is part of the broken human community in all respects. As the discussion paper puts it: "At the same time the brokenness of human community and the conflicts and struggles within humanity affect and involve the Christian community in each and every place."<sup>99</sup> Hence, the church is called to repent, as well as to renew its own life and witness on a daily basis. The church is sent by God to the world to witness to and embody the promises of the kingdom for all people.

The church is responsible in its witness to participate fully in the pains and struggles within human community without any failures or taking sides and it is called to witness to justice, peace, reconciliation, unity, care for creation and good working relationship between men and women as equals in the human community.<sup>100</sup> As in *Church and World*, the discussion paper also uses the term 'mystery' and 'prophetic sign' to describe the relationship between kingdom, world, and the church. In Christ, the mystery of God is revealed, and the church as the body of Christ participates in the divine mystery and enjoys the saving communion with Christ in faith. The church announces and anticipates the kingdom already present in Christ, says the discussion paper. As a prophetic sign the church, moved by the Holy Spirit, does not point to itself, but rather beyond itself to the kingdom of God. It is therefore called to be a prophetic sign of God's purpose for humankind and all creation. It points to the renewal of the human community and the life of the world to come.<sup>101</sup> Susan Moore recalls and alludes to this when she states that one of the aims of the Santiago conference was to help the churches relate the search for unity to their call to be effective signs of God's purpose for humanity and creation.<sup>102</sup> The role of the unity of the church towards social contexts becomes clearer in this regard.

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<sup>98</sup> See *Towards Koinonia in Faith, Life and Witness*, 1993, 35.

<sup>99</sup> See *Towards Koinonia in Faith, Life and Witness*, 1993, 35-36.

<sup>100</sup> See *Towards Koinonia in Faith, Life and Witness*, 1993, 36.

<sup>101</sup> See *Towards Koinonia in Faith, Life and Witness*, 1993, 36. See also, *Church and World: The Unity of the Church and the Renewal of Human Community. A Faith and Order Study Document* - Faith and Order Paper No. 151. 1990 - WCC, Geneva, 1990, 124-130.

<sup>102</sup> See Moore, "Towards Koinonia in Faith, Life and Witness": 1995, 9.

If the church fails to reflect the community of love, unity, justice, peace, reconciliation and freedom, it ultimately fails in its vocation of being the sign of the kingdom of God. For the church to stand on its vocation, it must constantly be renewed and empowered by the Holy Spirit. It can be argued that the challenge posed to the church is that of playing a fundamental role in working towards the renewal of broken relations in its own life and to join others to work towards a world in which the presence of God is experienced; a world of healing of divisions and where justice and peace prevails. The church as a sign of God's kingdom serves as a renewal ethic, a *koinonia* ethic. In the next chapter the terms of social and moral ethic with reference to the church will be introduced in order to explore its social engagement. These also highlight the fact that there is a strong relationship between ecclesiology and ethics. The church must witness to unity, justice, peace and reconciliation in the human community, heal the brokenness in a divided world. This must be clearly visible and seen in the life and mission of the church.

Secondly, the discussion paper explores that the mission of the church is to proclaim and announce in word and deed the good news of the rule of God. It must live the values of the kingdom of God and as such, it is already the foretaste of that reign in the world we live. The discussion paper further argues that the preaching of the Word of God, better known as evangelism, proclaiming the good news to all people, to those who never heard it and to those who rejected it after accepting it, is part and parcel of the mission of the church.<sup>103</sup> As the discussion paper puts it: "Mission includes service, characterised by caring, healing and working with non-Christians for a renewed world, as well as Evangelism."<sup>104</sup>

It must be noted that the mission of the church is not only embedded in preaching the Word, but also in an active involvement of the church in the community. One can argue that this is one of the threefold office of Christ, the Priestly task of the church in society. This emphasises the involvement of the church in social contexts as necessary for the caring, reconciling, and healing. Disunity of the churches hampers the goal of mission and evangelism; hence, churches are challenged to seek unity in order to work together in the mission of God, says the discussion paper.<sup>105</sup> Preaching the gospel to a broken world means that the church should take into consideration the whole human existence, where all

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<sup>103</sup> See *Towards Koinonia in Faith, Life and Witness*, 1993, 37.

<sup>104</sup> See *Towards Koinonia in Faith, Life and Witness*, 1993, 37.

<sup>105</sup> See *Towards Koinonia in Faith, Life and Witness*, 1993, 37.



dimensions such as the spiritual, moral, cultural, economic, and even political are addressed. These are the key issues that keep the community apart and promote social division. The church can play a remarkable role in its *koinonia*, especially in witnessing against the injustices that may arise from the above issues. The discussion paper strongly condemns the divisions that continue to take place amongst churches. The continuing division between the churches is nothing less but a scandal and it underestimates the mission of the church.<sup>106</sup> Unity and a common goal to mission and evangelism are encouraged amongst the churches.

Thirdly, the discussion paper notes that dialogue amongst religious groups is one of the major needs towards fulfilling our common witness as faith communities for the sake of peaceful communal life and harmony. It is fair to say that in order to make peace in the world, it is very important for the religions of the world to find peace amongst themselves first as a way forward. For the South African context, this interreligious dialogue and platform of religious groups in working for peace, reconciliation and justice, especially the focus on Reconstruction and Development Plan of the soul (RDP of soul) was initiated by former President Nelson Mandela. The National Religious Leaders (NRLF) Forum was established with the purpose of helping partnering with government on national unity, peace, reconciliation, justice and moral regeneration in South Africa. However, the discussion paper argues that in many parts of the world religion is used as an element in situations of division and conflict and that religious affiliation, language and symbols are used as to exacerbate conflict.<sup>107</sup> There is intolerance and ignorance towards one another and this can be caused by many issues around religious differences. But the question can also be asked whether this kind of living amongst faith communities will have fruitful results for a common good in communities and for their witness in the world. Can religious groups in their unity contribute positively towards social contexts without having to focus on their differences? It can be argued that the unity of different religious groups in the world remains the biggest challenge.

There is a growing tension of mistrust and fear amongst religious groups and this causes life in communities to be uneasy in different ways. The concluding chapter will also pay attention to the ecumenism struggle within the South African religious sector. The following questions may be asked: Does this mean that the religious groups cannot try to find ways of uniting on issues that affect the lives of people in the community? Is it very difficult for religious groups

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<sup>106</sup> See *Towards Koinonia in Faith, Life and Witness*, 1993, 38.

<sup>107</sup> See *Towards Koinonia in Faith, Life and Witness*, 1993, 38.



to work together on issues of reconciliation and justice? The discussion paper underscores that whenever there is fear and mistrust, there is a need for mutual knowledge, understanding and healing. Furthermore, it is a God-given task for churches to engage and contribute tremendously in dialogue for peaceful solutions of social, racial, ethnic and even national conflicts, in which different religious communities are involved.<sup>108</sup> I must highlight in this regard that a dialogue between different faith groups is not an easy task, but initiatives should be taken towards common witness. Churches and faith groups are encouraged to engage in dialogue in order to build mutual understanding and mutual trust.

The discussion paper underscores that one of the fundamental points of engaging in dialogue is to create possibilities to share with one another our faiths and traditions in common service to the community.<sup>109</sup> This will help in terms of breaking down the tension and create a reconciled spirit where a common action towards our responsibility in society as faith groups can be visible and be witnessed. Dialogue is seen as part of evangelism and mission. The discussion paper argues that dialogue cannot stop with mutual understanding and common action, but it includes authentic witness and its mission is to work for a community in which there is religious harmony and an active toleration.<sup>110</sup> For this reason, the Lund Principle that was mentioned earlier in this chapter can play a fundamental role in common witness in dialogue with people of other living faiths.

Fourthly, when we look at common witness to the values of the kingdom, it is very important to look back and trace whether the church is really embodying the values of the kingdom for the world to see. The discussion paper describes the church as a community of people in unity with Jesus Christ through the Holy Spirit, living in Christ's grace and having a special responsibility of participating and working with Jesus Christ for unity of all creation in God, reconciliation, healing and transformation of human community.<sup>111</sup> The discussion paper argues that in this work of God, we are united with God the Father and participate in Christ's redemptive work and we become a unique community that expresses God's love for the whole creation.<sup>112</sup> In this way, it can be argued that the church's responsibility towards social contexts becomes evident. In its unity with God, the church is called to be a peacemaker and

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<sup>108</sup> See *Towards Koinonia in Faith, Life and Witness*, 1993, 38-39.

<sup>109</sup> See *Towards Koinonia in Faith, Life and Witness*, 1993, 39.

<sup>110</sup> See *Towards Koinonia in Faith, Life and Witness*, 1993, 39.

<sup>111</sup> See *Towards Koinonia in Faith, Life and Witness*, 1993, 40.

<sup>112</sup> See *Towards Koinonia in Faith, Life and Witness*, 1993, 40.

healer of the human community. The life of the church is therefore marked by the cross and resurrection of Christ and the identity and life of the Christian community is shaped by its relationship with God and its relationship with the world. The church, right through its life, lives out its faith that is constantly challenged by decision making and behaviour on ethical problems that challenges the Christian community. Christians and individuals always differ in terms of making collective decisions on ethical challenges and this alone opens up the possibilities for disagreements and division.

The Christian community does have values of the kingdom such as sanctity of life, dignity and equality of all human beings created in God's image, the responsibility to create and develop patterns of life in which justice, peace and respect for all creation can flourish.<sup>113</sup> These values are executed by the Christian community in obedience to God and they guide it in solving the ethical problems. Some of the ethical problems might cause disruption and division in the Christian community; hence, Christians are encouraged to engage in a dialogue process to see whether a consensus can be reached in solving these problems. The Holy Spirit plays a significant role of guidance in this process. However, it is from this perspective and challenge that the churches are called to embody in their lives and witness the Gospel of Christ in every context and situation. This is why the unity of the church plays a crucial role in society. One can argue further that the role of the church on ethical issues is very crucial.

The discussion paper affirms that much ethical diversity is tolerable and even healthy in a church that is a concrete community of obedience. The discussion paper argues that cheap unity avoids morally contested issues because they disturb the peace of the church and that costly unity entails discovering the unity of the churches as a fruit of pursuing justice and peace.<sup>114</sup> It must be noted that the discussion paper echoed *Costly Unity* in Rønde when dealing with the discourse on costly unity. *Costly Unity* also makes the same remark when looking at the differences between costly unity and cheap unity, and this will be discussed in the next chapter of this study. However, the discussion paper further notes that ethical issues indicate such fundamental differences in behaviour and in understanding of the faith and at the end they become confessional matters involving sin and moral heresy, which leads to division. The example of this fact will be discussed further in chapter five and six of this dissertation, especially with regard to the South African context at the birth of apartheid.

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<sup>113</sup> See *Towards Koinonia in Faith, Life and Witness*, 1993, 40.

<sup>114</sup> See *Towards Koinonia in Faith, Life and Witness*, 1993, 40-41.

Apartheid was therefore confessed as heresy and sin by the World Alliance of Reformed Churches (WARC), as well as by the Dutch Reformed Mission Church (DRMC) in their Belhar Confession of 1986. Again, the discussion paper encourages Christians to be rooted in the gospel and informed of the advances of human knowledge in a world influenced by science and technology. Christians need to equip themselves to dialogue with those whose decisions are crucial for the future of humanity and creation.

This is a fundamental remark by the discussion paper, as it deals with a range of other issues that affect the human community and creation. With regard to technology and science, one could also think of the gas used by aircrafts and cars that also affect human lives and the whole creation. What does the church say about the impact of the weapons of mass destruction? What does the church say about the arms deal issue, which does not only threaten the lives of people in terms of health and well-being, but also its threat to peace in the world? Christians need to dialogue and engage with those in political leaderships, science, industry and commerce, says the study document.<sup>115</sup> In their calling and witness, they need to embody and live according to the values of the kingdom. The church is challenged to be authentic in its calling by standing on God's side on matters of reconciliation, peace, justice and unity. It must address the question of unjust treatment of women by men not only in the church, but also in society where this culture is practised and lived.

Lastly, with regard to common witness in the care for creation, the Third Assembly of the World Council of Church in 1961 at New Delhi, the conference stated that the love of the Triune God is the source and goal of the unity that God wills for all humanity and creation. At this present moment, Christians are expecting the healing, liberation and restoration of the whole creation from the destructive powers of evil.<sup>116</sup> The discussion paper convincingly argues that Christians are called by God to participate in the healing and reconciling process by creating visible signs for the new heaven and the new earth. I concur with the discussion paper when it states that the care for creation cannot be separated from the Christian's communion and relationship with God. Moreover, the discussion paper further reminds us that our sinfulness poses a threat to the goodness and wholeness of creation.<sup>117</sup>

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<sup>115</sup> See *Towards Koinonia in Faith, Life and Witness*, 1993, 41.

<sup>116</sup> See *Towards Koinonia in Faith, Life and Witness*, 1993, 41.

<sup>117</sup> See *Towards Koinonia in Faith, Life and Witness*, 1993, 41-42.

The emphasis is grounded in the fact that human beings are an integral part of the creation, they are both of the earth and earthy according to Genesis 2:7. The biblical witness in Genesis 1:27 reminds us that human beings have a responsibility of preserving nature, tending the earth and working with God toward sustaining the creation of which all human beings are part. Hence, Christians are called to act and live responsibly in their own lives and with others to care for the creation. Living a peaceful life with others will add more value to the wholeness of creation. Christians are therefore called to create a just and peaceful society. The discussion paper argues that for many centuries, Christians have emphasised that through Christ the whole created order is brought into the scope of God's redeeming love, and humanity's role is to offer the creation back to God in thankfulness, respect and reverence.<sup>118</sup> In its worship, the church offers the creation back to God on behalf of all human beings. Christians take charge of preserving God's creation and taking responsibility towards caring for all creation.

### 3.8. Conclusion

The call to *koinonia* in the *Faith, Life and Witness* study is very helpful for the argument of this dissertation. It became increasingly clear that the *koinonia* in faith cannot be disconnected to the *koinonia* in life and *koinonia* in witness. The *koinonia* in faith points to the very essence of the unity of the church, whilst *koinonia* in life and witness draws the church closer to its vocation towards social contexts. It can be argued that there is a strong connection between the call to unity, witness and service as proposed by *Church and World* in the previous chapter, as well as the call to *koinonia* in faith, in life and in witness as proposed by the discussion paper document under the notion of *koinonia*. Both these documents argue that the unity of the church cannot be disconnected to its witness and service in social contexts. The discussion paper clearly points out that the church's responsibility involves its witness on peace and justice issues, it involves the care for all humanity and creation in the world. One of the remaining significant questions regarding the discussion paper relates to the dialogue process between religious groups in human community, especially on how issues of justices can be agreed upon as a common agenda. The reason behind this could be the fact that some serious ethical concerns for one religious group do not count as serious to the other. How can one religious group work together with others on ethical issues in social contexts without

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<sup>118</sup> See *Towards Koinonia in Faith, Life and Witness*, 1993, 43.

compromising its own convictions? Can *koinonia* in faith, life and in witness without disconnection serve as a guide to a dialogue process with other religious groups? These questions open up more discussion and research in this regard, especially with the involvement of other religious groups other than Christian community.

The discussion paper is clear that without unity, churches will find it very difficult to witness and provide service in social contexts. It must be noted that the outcomes of the *Faith and Order* world conference on *Towards Koinonia in Faith, Life and Witness* at Santiago de Compostela in 1993 were very helpful in terms of guiding the church to fruitful unity, as well as finding a link between the church and its vocation. In a sense, the discussion paper draws some closer relations between ecclesiology and ethics. A foundation to these outcomes of Santiago was also laid by the consultation on theological issues of church and society at Zagorsk in March 1968. At that consultation, it was argued that in the search for church unity, the churches must be open to recognise other popular movements as sources of inspiration and innovation as a way of learning from them. In addition, the unity of the church must express itself as a community acting in solidarity with the victims of social and political disorder in society. This simply means that the unity of the church must express itself in faith, life and witness in social contexts. The life of church communion must have meaning and positive contribution in a broken human community.

Again in Korea, at the Seoul meeting of the Life and Work Commission of the WCC in 1990, the interconnection between ecclesiology and ethics was demonstrated with an intention of committing the churches in a unified and binding manner to confront the life and death issues, the notion of *koinonia* developed, which served as a vision integrating the concerns of conciliar process and covenant. *Koinonia* embraces the whole of our existence; the three subthemes cannot be separated when speaking of *koinonia*. *Koinonia* in faith will never make sense without *koinonia* in life and witness. In our endeavours for church unity we should also think of the consequences of such unity for human community and creation. The Santiago conference teaches us that the church cannot disconnect itself from the real life of human community. A question that can be asked is what role church unity can play in the renewal of a broken, sick, vulnerable and disjointed human community. The other significant point from Santiago is the fact that Christians must bear diversity and celebrate it. Santiago warned Christians and churches not to regard their diversity and the need to confess, celebrate the one faith in many contexts as a threat to church unity. It can be concluded that this understanding

of unity in diversity is costly unity, which requires costly commitment amongst Christians, in costly obedience to the Lord who called us to this unity. The deliberate reason behind the recent focus on *koinonia* was the attempt to bring ecclesiology and ethical concerns together in a new and fruitful way.

## Chapter 4

### Ecclesiology and Ethics

#### 4.1. Introduction

As means of developing the process towards visible unity during the World Council of Churches (WCC) world conference of Faith and Order in Santiago in 1993, the notion of *koinonia* was used to help the churches relate the search for unity to their call to be effective signs of God's purpose for humanity and creation. The same notion of *koinonia* was an attempt to bring ecclesiology and ethical concerns together in a new and fruitful way. In an attempt to explore the interrelations between ecclesiology and ethics, three consultations were held under the themes *Costly Unity*, *Costly Commitment* and *Costly Obedience*. A final report was subsequently published under the theme: *Ecclesiology and Ethics: Ecumenical Ethical Engagement, Moral Formation and the Nature of the Church*, which gives the results of these three consultations from 1992-1996.<sup>1</sup> This chapter will discuss the significance of these consultations and the developments of this interrelation between ecclesiology and ethics by also using the other reports associated with these consultations. The basic framework of these reports will be employed in this chapter in order to follow the flow of their arguments.

The discussion around the interrelation between ecclesiology and ethics comes a very long way. Ernst Conradie, in his introductory article on the book titled *South African Perspectives on Notions and Forms of Ecumenicity*, notes that following the Seoul convocation on Justice Peace and Integrity of Creation (JPIC) in 1990, where the ecclesiological assumptions of the conciliar process became a bone of contention, the WCC commissioned a study project on "ecclesiology and ethics." However, this study on ecclesiology and ethics was jointly conducted by Faith and Order (Unit I) and Justice, Peace and Creation (Unit III) in order to explore the link between what the church is and what the church does.<sup>2</sup> In this way, the study wanted to explore the ethical dimension and engagement of the church, not as separate to the life of the church, but as part and parcel of its worship, its confession of faith, and its witness and service in the world. The study on ecclesiology and ethics aimed to heal divisions

<sup>1</sup> See *Ecclesiology and Ethics: Ecumenical Ethical Engagement, Moral Formation and the Nature of the Church*, Thomas F. Best and Martin Robra, (eds.), WCC, Geneva, 1997, 1-122.

<sup>2</sup> See E.M. Conradie, 2013. Notions and Forms of Ecumenicity: Some South Africa perspectives. In: *South African Perspectives on Notions and Forms of Ecumenicity*: in Ernst M. Conradie (ed.) Sun Press, Stellenbosch, 2013, 40.

between the Faith and Order and Life and Work movements.<sup>3</sup> It must be noted that the *Church and World* study as discussed in chapter two has laid a good theological foundation for how ecclesiology relates to ethics.

With regard to *Ecclesiology and Ethics*, after its final reporting to the central committee in 1996, Christians and churches are continuously encouraged to consider its results and test them through their own experience. According to this study report, two convictions guided this whole study and provided a framework for reflection on its process. The first conviction is that ecumenical ethical reflection and action are intrinsic to the nature and life of the church. Hence, ecclesiological and ethical reflection cannot be separated. The second conviction is that ecclesiology and Christian ethics must stay in close dialogue, each honouring and learning from the distinctive language and thought-forms of the other. It must be noted that from the very beginning, these two convictions paved a way and offered a response to the question of this study, which seeks to understand the role of church unity in social contexts. This emphasises the fact that the church cannot be the church without ethics. The report on *Ecclesiology and Ethics* states that from the side of ecclesiology, this meant the language of *koinonia*, of hope and memory, Eucharist and Baptism, of the church, whereas for ethics it involved particularly the notions of the church as “moral community”, the community that necessarily wrestles in light of the gospel with issues of moral import and of moral formation.<sup>4</sup>

In this chapter, I will look at these three notions, *Costly Unity*, *Costly Commitment*, and *Costly Obedience*, as means of investigating an answer on how ecclesiology relates to ethics and what significance church unity has for social contexts. Some questions can be asked, such as: Can the church’s mission and action serve a powerful role on issues of justice and peace in society? In what way can the church witness to this in society? Can the unity of the church play any role in social contexts? This chapter will also offer some perspectives on the tension between ecclesiology and ethics in South Africa in order concretise the discussion further. This will be done by looking at some contributions from South African theological voices on the theme of this study. However, a broader picture of these tensions within the South African context will be given in more detail in the next chapter of this study. I will also shed some light on the existing debate on the church unity tensions and struggles within the Dutch

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<sup>3</sup> See *Ecclesiology and Ethics*: 1997, vii.

<sup>4</sup> See *Ecclesiology and Ethics*, 1997, ix-x.



Reformed family of churches. With the knowledge drawn from this chapter, I will explore ways in which the unity within the DR family of churches can make a positive contribution to social contexts, especially within the South African context. This simply means that they will require a costly unity and costly commitment to each other, knowing that they are called to costly obedience in their witness and service in social contexts.

## 4.2. Costly Unity

The first consultation took place on 24-28 February 1993 in Rønne, Denmark, under the theme *Costly Unity*. The consultation in Rønne was an attempt to renew the efforts to bring together the too often separated wings of the ecumenical quests, as represented in the Faith and Order and Life and Work movements. *Costly Unity* affirms that from its very beginning the unity movement has wrestled with issues of ecumenical social witness and action. In a sense, all the ways in which the church is understood validate its nature and vocation as a “moral” community.<sup>5</sup> On the question of the tension between these movements of the WCC, the American dogmatic theologian Emmanuel Clapsis also underscores that the relationship of ecclesiology and ethics is a perennial issue of tension in the life of the WCC. It represents the concerns and sensitivities of the two great movements of Faith and Order and Life and Work that have given life to the WCC. Clapsis also critically comments that these movements cannot move and contribute towards the visible expression of the church’s unity unless they continue to be in a conversation of mutual enrichment and correction with each other.<sup>6</sup> What Clapsis tries to bring to attention here is that the only solution to bring ecclesiology and ethics together is to have them dialogue on how they relate to each other in a special way.

One can argue that similar tensions can be traced within the history of the DR family of churches after a long period of struggle for church unity and the tension in part caused by the Dutch Reformed Church (DRC) and its relations to apartheid. The involvement of this church in justifying apartheid created tension on how the church relates to society. If apartheid in South Africa was declared a heresy and sin, which simply means it is unethical behaviour and conduct, the question can be asked whether the credibility of the DRC as a church and its

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<sup>5</sup> See *Costly Unity*: 1997, 2.

<sup>6</sup> See E. Clapsis, 1995. Ecclesiology and Ethics: Reflections by an Orthodox Theologian. *Ecumenical Review*, Volume 47, No. 2 April, 1995, 155. For a brief overview on the tensions between Faith and Order and Life and Work commissions of the WCC on the struggle to combine ecclesiology and ethics together in a fruitful way, see E.M. Conradie, *Notions and Forms of Ecumenicity*: 2013, 25-45.

vocation and witness to the world was not at stake, especially with regard to issues of justice. One can further argue that only when these tensions are cleared and dusted, and the vision of reunification is embodied, the unity of the DR family of churches can play a really significant role in the social contexts. However, it is also well known how the ecumenical movement struggled to bring the justice, peace and the integrity of creation process and the unity discussion together in a fruitful way. As a step forward in finding solutions on the struggle of combining ecclesiology and ethics together, the *Costly Unity* consultation at Rønne affirmed the role of the church as moral community.

Duncan Forrester echoed this affirmation by stating that *Costly Unity* declared that moral issues and struggles often mark the distinction between cheap and costly unity. Cheap unity avoids morally contested issues because they would disturb church unity.<sup>7</sup> Forrester further states that unity is a costly gift, and it is both totally gratuitous and deeply demanding. It has been won for us by Christ on the cross, and he absorbed and forever overcame the powerful forces of disunity, hostility, contempt, suspicion, injustice and oppression. The same Christ welcomes us into the unity and *shalom* that he has gained for us and for all humankind, but he does not coerce us into unity.<sup>8</sup> One can argue that the totally gratuitous and deeply demanding cost of unity becomes visible when unity is lived and practised in our daily lives; when unity oppresses injustices and opts for true reconciliation and true justice of God. In this way, costly unity embraces equality of life as declared in John 10:10: “I have come that they may have life, and have it to the full.”

Moreover, in line with Forrester, the Belhar Confession has a similar understanding of church unity. The Belhar Confession states that this unity is both a gift and obligation, but no one is forced to unity.<sup>9</sup> This expression of the Belhar Confession will be dealt with in detail in chapter seven, especially with reference to the article on (costly) unity in this confession. According to Forrester, *Costly Unity* is discovering the churches’ unity as a gift of pursuing justice and peace.<sup>10</sup> It becomes evident that Forrester argues for an ecclesiology that embraces ethics as part of its own life and vocation and that it must witness to justice and peace in the world. This relates to the interest of this study on the unity of the church that significantly

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<sup>7</sup> See D. Forrester, 1997. *The True Church and Morality: Reflections on Ecclesiology and Ethics*, WCC, Geneva, 1997, 19.

<sup>8</sup> See Forrester, *The True Church and Morality*: 1997, 14.

<sup>9</sup> J. Botha and P. Naudé, 2011. “The Belhar Confession (1986)”: in Johan Botha and Piet Naudé: *Good News to Confess: The Belhar Confession and the road of acceptance*, Bible Media, Wellington, 2011, 19.

<sup>10</sup> See Forrester, *The True Church and Morality*: 1997, 15.

contributes to social contexts where injustices towards humanity are displayed in various forms. In this regard, Forrester reminds us as Christians that in this unity we are called to exemplify the unity and harmony, reconciliation and justice that have been won for us by Christ.<sup>11</sup> This clearly means that as Christians we must be conformed to Christ. It means that the way of life that Christ lived and the things that he had done must be done by us as his church in the world.

During the *Costly Unity* consultation, it was found that more common ground existed than many have noted. *Costly Unity* noted the interconnectedness of the search for the visible unity of the church and the quest for justice, peace and caring for creation. The *Ecclesiology and Ethics* report affirms that *Church and World* study document of Faith and Order in chapter two of this study has developed those aspects of the Faith and Order tradition that lend themselves to that interaction. *Costly Unity* summarises the interconnection between the visible unity of the church and the quest for justice, peace and caring for creation as articulated in the so-called *Koinonia in Faith, Life and Witness* discussion paper (discussed in detail in chapter 2) as follows:

The church as *koinonia* is called to share not only in the suffering of its own community but in the suffering of all; by advocacy and care for the poor, needy and marginalised; by joining all efforts for justice and peace within human societies; by exercising and promoting responsible stewardship of creation and keeping alive hope in the heart of humanity.<sup>12</sup>

I want to argue that this position explicitly clarifies the role of the church in the social contexts. It also affirms that the unity of the church must express itself in different ways in the suffering human community. This is a demand of costly unity. Forrester puts it this way:

The church stands in the midst of deep-seated conflicts to show that hostilities can be and have been overcome, that reconciliation is a reality. The being of the church, its inner life and its outward organization should confirm and exemplify the gospel that it preaches.<sup>13</sup>

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<sup>11</sup> See Forrester, *The True Church and Morality*: 1997, 15.

<sup>12</sup> See *Costly Unity*: 1997, 3.

<sup>13</sup> See Forrester, *The True Church and Morality*: 1997, 15-16.

Costly unity demands that the church involves itself in issues of peace, justice and reconciliation; not only for its own sake, but also for the sake of the social contexts worldwide. Whenever the church preaches reconciliation and justice, it must be an example and denounce any possible divisions. M. Jojo and S.J. Fung also share the same sentiments on the issue of the church as *koinonia* from their Asian perspective. They argue that the church as *koinonia* is a church of solidarity, in active solidarity with the struggles of the poor of Asia, in solidarity with God's creation, defending and promoting its integrity. Jojo and Fung further see *koinonia* within a community of faith and equal disciples as a community for and with others, and *koinonia* within a community of the few as empowering solidarity.<sup>14</sup> It can be argued that in this kind of *koinonia*, the church stands with the marginalised in social contexts. Christians are taught to be there for others and this can be exemplified with the notion of the body of Christ. This is also a call from the Belhar Confession, given that the confession states that the church must stand where God stands; with the poor, the oppressed, including those who are on the margins in social contexts.

However, in noting this common ground between Faith and Order and Life and Work, the *Church and World* study document explores that in the process of this work, visible unity between churches entails the renewal of broken relationships between members of the church, as well as the work for renewal, justice and peace in the world. Furthermore, the Eucharistic vision of the church embraces all aspects of life. *Costly Unity* asserts that the Eucharistic celebration demands reconciliation and sharing amongst all those regarded as brothers and sisters in the one family of God and is a constant challenge in the search for appropriate relationship in social, economic and political life and that all types of injustice are challenged when we share in the body and blood of Christ.<sup>15</sup> These are common grounds laid out in order to discuss the way forward of combining the work of the Faith and Order and Life and Work commissions of the WCC.

Clapsis is correct when he states that the quest for the visible unity of the church has always been related to the church's witness and mission in the world. For Clapsis, it is also true to state that the witness of the Life and Work movement was grounded implicitly and explicitly upon the basic precepts of the Christian gospel. Clapsis concludes that if both have recognised

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<sup>14</sup> See Jojo, M and Fung, S.J, *Taking a forward leap: Understanding proclamation, Church and Unity*. <http://eapi.admu.edu.ph/content/taking-forward-leap-understanding-proclamation-church-and-unity> [Accessed - 25/07/2013].

<sup>15</sup> See *Costly Unity*: 1997, 3.

that ecclesiology and ethics cannot be separated, then our task is to search for new ways of doing ecclesiology, which is informed both by the gospel and the life of the world.<sup>16</sup> It is evident that there is an inseparable interconnectedness between ecclesiology and ethics.

In the *Costly Unity* report the first section of the report engages the JPIC process and report, paying attention to the notion of the church as moral community. *Costly Unity* states that the being of the church is at stake in the Justice, Peace and Integrity of Creation process. For this reason, *Costly Unity* argues that the moral thrust of JPIC is not only seen as related to the nature and function of the church, but it can also be described from the experience of JPIC as a conciliar process and from the experience of the church's nature itself. *Koinonia* is seen as an appropriate term for both ways.<sup>17</sup> According to the *Costly Unity* report, faith and discipleship are embodied in and as a community way of life and that the memory of Jesus Christ, formative of the church itself, is a force shaping of moral existence.<sup>18</sup> In this regard one can conclude that the church in its *koinonia* can play a remarkable role in shaping not only the life of those who belong to it, but also the entire society. *Costly Unity* proclaims that the Trinity is experienced as an image for human community and the basis for social doctrine and ecclesial reality and with this proclamation, the church is seen as not only having, but being, a social ethic, a *koinonia* ethic.<sup>19</sup>

Forrester alludes to the idea of the church as a social ethic. In this regard, he cites Stanley Hauerwas, who says:

The task of the church is to pioneer those institutions and practices that the wider society has not learned as forms of justice. (At times it is also possible that the church can learn from society more just ways of forming life). The church, therefore, must act as a paradigmatic community in the hope of providing some indication of what the world can be but is not...The church does not have, but rather is a social ethic.<sup>20</sup>

Konrad Raiser echoes *Costly Unity* and states that the Rønde consultation tried to redefine the relationship of ecclesiology and ethics on the basis of the understanding of the church as

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<sup>16</sup> See Clapsis, *Ecclesiology and Ethics*: 1995, 155.

<sup>17</sup> See *Costly Unity*: 1997, 4.

<sup>18</sup> See *Costly Unity*: 1997, 4-5.

<sup>19</sup> See *Costly Unity*: 1997, 5.

<sup>20</sup> See Forrester, *The True Church and Morality*: 1997, 46-47.

*koinonia*. Raiser says the church not only has an ethic, but it is itself an ethical reality, for the discipleship of Christ shapes moral existence and life in the Spirit opens our eyes to the sacramental relatedness of all life.<sup>21</sup>

The notion of the church as social ethic, a *koinonia* ethic could possibly link with *Church and World*'s affirmation in chapter two, where the church is seen as both a mystery and a sign that points to the kingdom. *Church and World* argues that the church is in this world, it serves and witness in this world, but it is not of this world. This stresses the fact that the unity of the church must be of significance and impact towards social contexts. As a moral community, the church has a role to play in renewing and transforming social contexts. For *Costly Unity*, to contribute in a particular moral cause does not necessarily signify entry into or belonging to the church. Church existence is not dependent upon the moral activities of its members, but its origins and ongoing life rest in the lavish grace and patience of God.<sup>22</sup> It becomes evident that there are structures other than the church within society that can contribute towards morally good citizenship. *Costly Unity* argues that the moral lapses on the part of church members may and often do threaten the credible witness of the church. *Costly Unity* takes cognisance of the fact that not all moral concerns carry the same weight and require the same response. However, the church is called to respond to threats to life as a moral imperative and is bound by its nature and purpose to act decisively when life itself is threatened by whatever forces – economic, political, and military and through damage to the environment.<sup>23</sup> One can argue that the same response and action to life threats was given by the churches in South Africa against the apartheid regime. The churches took a stand when the credibility of the gospel was at stake and when the lives of many people in society were threatened. The Belhar Confession is just one of many ways of churches' response to apartheid and this will be shown later in this dissertation. The Belhar Confession response is just one example of the significant interrelation between ecclesiology and ethics and the unity of the church and its contribution to social context.

As an attempt to address the situation of moral challenges and struggle today, *Costly Unity* suggests that the church as a moral community should help foster a sacramental orientation towards life, in a way the church understands itself, its *esse*, its mission and witness on a

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<sup>21</sup> See K. Raiser, 1996. Ecumenical Discussion of Ethics and Ecclesiology: *Ecumenical Review*, Volume 48, No 1, January, 1996, 9.

<sup>22</sup> See *Costly Unity*: 1997, 5.

<sup>23</sup> See *Costly Unity*: 1997, 5.

sacramental and Eucharistic basis. In this regard, with baptism, it means those who are baptized become the effective witnesses and martyrs to gospel values in the world in as much that baptism is at the heart of the church and that the Eucharist is a sacrament of communion and a real food for a scattered people in their moral struggle, to heal the brokenness of human being and community. In both these sacraments, the church sees its internal unity and solidarity with others as expressions of sharing the bread of life and that these sacraments as person shaping rites can eventually lead to sacramental living.<sup>24</sup>

One can argue that in this way *Costly Unity* calls for Christians to not only remember these sacraments, but also to embody these symbols in their daily lives. One can further argue that the sacrament of Baptism symbolises a sense of belonging, a *koinonia* and unity, whereas the Eucharist touches not only to the significance of *koinonia*, but also on the very essence of an ethical dimension of the church, especially with regard to sharing equally, reconciliation, justice and equality of all humanity. The American theologian Larry Rasmussen states that one of the church's vocational tasks is to form moral character. Rasmussen argues that this is not the only task, but it is a crucial one for the church. He points out that when the church helps form moral character and shape moral judgments and actions, it then functions as a moral community. These activities define it as a moral community, whether the results are morally praiseworthy or not.<sup>25</sup>

#### 4.2.1. The implications of the notion of *koinonia*

It is important to take cognisance that the notion of *koinonia* has been discussed in different consultations of the WCC, for example during the Life and Work conference in Seoul, where the conciliar and covenant were discussed and also on the preparation document for the Fifth Faith and Order world conference at Santiago de Compostela, which examined the three subthemes of *koinonia* in faith, life and witness. The second section of *Costly Unity* report engages the implications of *koinonia* by paying attention first to *koinonia* and ethics in the New Testament.

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<sup>24</sup> See *Costly Unity*: 1997, 7.

<sup>25</sup> See L. Rasmussen, 1995. Moral Community and Moral Formation: *Ecumenical Review*, Volume 47, No 2, April, 1995, 182.

*Costly Unity* states that in the New Testament, the term *koinonia* is used in reference to the interaction and sharing of believers within the local Christian community and this is to be understood as a reference to a concrete community of obedience. Belonging to this community of obedience and being baptised constantly reminds us about following in the footsteps of Christ. Choosing to belong to the community implies conscious moral choices.<sup>26</sup> *Costly Unity* further states that the original and strong relation between faith and the moral life was changed and in some cases also weakened in the process and that Christian obedience tended to become formalised along the lines of penitence, as well as along the lines of compliance with public orders. In relation to this fact, the radical obedience found in the New Testament and in later history exemplified by martyrs and saints was diminished.<sup>27</sup> It must be noted that the question of making moral choices within a Christian community is more complicated and it leads to moral judgments by those who prefer different choices than others. For example, the question whether to make a moral choice with regard to abortion, sex before marriage and even on sexual orientation, stimulates emotional debates amongst Christians.

*Costly Unity* further reports that in recent years Christians have recovered the fundamental relation between ethics and *koinonia*, between moral life and community, seeking inspiration on the New Testament witness on this point. Out of this development, a community of disciples developed, rather than individual Christians. Christian ethics becomes a reflection on the life of the community in the context and the perspective on the problems of human life in general.<sup>28</sup> In many cases Christian and other religious communities are requested to give a moral guidance to society. They become moral agents and a moral compass to direct the human community to be morally good citizens.

It must be noted that a community is essentially seen by many people as a place of comfort and support. In this regard Jojo and Fung also strongly argue that the local church as seen as *koinonia* consists of communities of faith and that life within these communities must reflect the *koinonia* of the triune God. However, the triune communion respects the otherness of the other. Jojo and Fund emphasise that these communities of faith are also the “space” for bringing about what they call “communities of equal disciples” between women and men,

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<sup>26</sup> See *Costly Unity*: 1997, 8.

<sup>27</sup> See *Costly Unity*: 1997, 8.

<sup>28</sup> See *Costly Unity*: 1997, 9.



also between members who are in the existing dominant and marginal communities.<sup>29</sup> According to *Costly Unity*, *koinonia* implies an offer to all human beings involved in moral struggles and in need of frameworks and perspectives. It is at this fundamental point where a moral life of the Christian community is seen as witness.<sup>30</sup> This points to the fact that Christian *koinonia* or church unity and the church's witness to issues of justice play a fundamental role in social contexts, especially in contexts where injustices occur.

Secondly, the *Costly Unity* report pays attention to *koinonia* with reference to other biblical images for the church. Here, *koinonia* is seen as only one of many other images of the church in the New Testament. *Costly Unity* underscores that *koinonia* stands alongside expressions such as “people of God”, “body of Christ”, and the “Temple of the Holy Spirit”.<sup>31</sup> These biblical images for the church are also referred to in chapter one of this study.<sup>32</sup> For *Costly Unity*, the term “church” (*ekklesia*) itself is an image and each image for the community formed by the gospel carries with it a particular emphasis and context of meaning. With regard to *koinonia*'s main reference, it is the interaction or sharing of believers within the local Christian community. *Koinonia* is seen here as more than sharing, but also means participation in something held or known in common (Acts 2).<sup>33</sup> This suggests that *koinonia* can be used widely in various meanings and contexts. *Costly Unity* concludes that *koinonia* refers to a community beyond ethnicity and family, which exists on the basis of the gospel. It is further suggested that our understanding of *koinonia* should expand outward to mean a communion in which we share in Christ and have a common vision for a newly just, peaceful and responsible world, despite imperfect communions and still fractured relationships.<sup>34</sup> The JPIC process understands *koinonia* in this bigger picture and this leads to the imperatives of the unity we seek that will also benefit the social contexts.

Thirdly, the *Costly Unity* report also pays attention to the concept of the covenant. In this regard, *Costly Unity* states that part of the content of *koinonia* is concretised by covenant.

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<sup>29</sup> See Jojo and Fung *Taking a forward leap: Understanding proclamation, Church and Unity*. <http://eapi.admu.edu.ph/content/taking-forward-leap-understanding-proclamation-church-and-unity> [Accessed - 25/07/2013].

<sup>30</sup> See *Costly Unity*: 1997, 9.

<sup>31</sup> See *Costly Unity*: 1997, 10.

<sup>32</sup> The preparation document for the fifth world conference of the Faith and Order commission gives more detail on each of these biblical images for the church. For more information on these biblical images, see Faith and Order Paper No.198, 2005. *The Nature and Mission of the Church: A stage on the way to a common statement* Geneva: WCC. 16-25.

<sup>33</sup> See *Costly Unity*: 1997, 10.

<sup>34</sup> See *Costly Unity*: 1997, 10-11.

However, it is emphasised that any covenant between human beings carries the biblical sense only if it is made before God with the intention of obedience to God's covenantal requirements.<sup>35</sup> *Costly Unity* suggests that where covenant is used, it must be clearly stated that it is God's covenant, not ours as human beings. In this regard it becomes evident that God is the author of the covenant, not human beings. In a covenant, God cares for all of God's creatures, and this has not only to do with living things, but with creation itself. This is clearly seen in Jeremiah (4:23, 26-27), where the punishment of God's people for the transgression of the covenant is pictured as creation returning to chaos. However, in this context, the implications of the covenant for seeking and doing justice become clear.<sup>36</sup>

In the New Testament, Ephesians and Colossians also refer to the meanings connecting covenant to the renewal of creation. As *Costly Unity* puts it:

The 'new covenant in my blood' of the Eucharist further binds God's calling of the community of faith to the transformation of the created order. The deepest purpose of the covenant has been made manifest through the incarnation, cross and resurrection of Jesus Christ.<sup>37</sup>

The covenant between God and us as God's people has specific content, just as in the olden days of ancient Israel. Christians need to be obedient to this covenant of God.

Fourthly, the report pays attention to the conciliar fellowship. In this regard *Costly Unity* fairly states that the intention is not to use the notion of *koinonia* as the only model for searching unity, but to also look at the JPIC movement and its notion of the conciliar fellowship as adopted at the Assembly in Nairobi. William Henn applauds this move by *Costly Unity* and sees it as a sign of balance not to consider the church under only one model or conceptualization of *koinonia*. Henn states that whilst more could be made of conceptions such as the church as prophetic sign, *Costly Unity* still remains aware of the variety of ways in which the church may be described and the potential relevance of a number of these for relating the nature of the church to its social mission.<sup>38</sup> Henn also observes three things with regard to the issue of structure that can enhance the common witness of the church on behalf

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<sup>35</sup> See *Costly Unity*: 1997, 11.

<sup>36</sup> See *Costly Unity*: 1997, 11.

<sup>37</sup> See *Costly Unity*: 1997, 12.

<sup>38</sup> See W. Henn, 1995. "Reactions and Responses... to Costly Unity and to the Discussion in Santiago: A Roman Catholic Perspective". *Ecumenical Review*, Volume 47, No.2 April 1995, 141.

of justice, peace and the integrity of creation. Firstly, he observes that even now various Christian communities are taking public stances on the moral imperatives implied by particular social situations or problems. In this regard, Henn refers to what Desmond Tutu said at the Santiago world conference, namely that apartheid is too strong for a divided church and also the ways in which Christians are still not reunited in full communion, but yet still joined hands against apartheid.<sup>39</sup>

Secondly, for Henn in seeking accountability structures of common social commitment before the arrival of full ecclesial communion could help to alleviate what may well be one of the major sources of tension within the ecumenical movement. The sense of urgency in *Costly Unity* is seen by Henn as inevitable in the context of advocacy of justice, peace and the integrity of creation. As he puts it: “If someone is being violated or murdered, there is no time to wait before responding to the urgency of the situation. To wait is to be too late”.<sup>40</sup> During apartheid, for instance, structures such as the South African Council of Churches (SACC), Christian Institute (CI) and many other institutions played a significant role in advocating justice and peace. Some light will be shed later on the discourse around the significant contribution of these structures. Lastly, Henn is of the opinion that such common action is most likely to take place and to have its greatest effect at the local and not at the universal level. The reason behind his argument is based upon the role of the local church, which seems to be that of the formation of convinced Christians who, as individuals and in communion with others, will make choices and take a stand in promoting justice, peace, and the integrity of creation (JPIC), as it looks like the universal level is not capable of determining precisely what action should be advocated in a particular situation.<sup>41</sup>

Fifthly, the *Costly Unity* report also pays attention to the world that is faced with a complex set of issues with regard to what is happening locally and globally. *Costly Unity* notes that in the world today, every local issue has its global implications, and every global issue asks for a local response. The reality of this statement can be linked with two sets of issues; firstly, the issue of apartheid in South Africa that had global implications and the issue of globalization that asks for a local response. In this regard, *Costly Unity* underscores that not all JPIC issues have achieved adequate local translations and those local groups of Christians often fail to

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<sup>39</sup> See Henn, *Reactions and Responses*, 1995, 144-145.

<sup>40</sup> See Henn, *Reactions and Responses*, 1995, 145.

<sup>41</sup> See Henn, *Reactions and Responses*, 1995, 145-146.

catch the global reality in which they live.<sup>42</sup> *Costly Unity* argues that sometimes an issue may be global in its importance and yet not susceptible of any single explanation or formula, so varied are its ramifications in different places. Again, sometimes a global issue is such that it comes to expression most clearly in some particular locality whose Christian people then have special responsibility for defining its importance for the *oikoumene*.<sup>43</sup> *Costly Unity* suggests that we need new forms of expression for both the local and the global depending on the issue and the setting.

Sixth, the report also deals with the tension between diversity and unity. Diversity as an ecclesial fact and theme has in many places become fragmentation and brokenness. *Costly Unity* points out that the congregations in many places have their own unique way of interpreting their faith. One wonders if this could be the case in South Africa, where different racial groups now worship together, as well being part of the same church, as in the case of the Uniting Reformed Church in Southern Africa (URCSA), the Methodist Church of Southern Africa (MCSA) and the Uniting Presbyterian Church of Southern Africa (UPCSA). How is diversity in unity treated amongst these churches? *Costly Unity* says that already in the early church the apostolic faith existed in many cultures and languages, with widely differing customs, including liturgical texts and forms. This type of diversity can also lead to conflict and division.<sup>44</sup> One can certainly note that diversity and unity enrich each other. The unity of the church finds its complete expression in diversity and how this unity in diversity is lived in a visible and practical ways. The two expressions, namely, unity and diversity do not mean the absence of conflict. But what is important here is how the conflict is addressed and managed to find the real essence of the meaning of unity in diversity as expressed in the notion of the body of Christ.

Jojo and Fung also note that the local church is constituted by the different ethnic groups in their specific cultural identity. However, this diversity qualifies this *koinonia* in a way that it does not divide the believers into factions based on such boundary markers as language, race, colour, culture, gender and caste. In their opinion, this diversity is a communion that is boundary-less and yet ever inclusive of the different people, because it is a *koinonia* imbued

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<sup>42</sup> See *Costly Unity*: 1997, 13.

<sup>43</sup> See *Costly Unity*: 1997, 14.

<sup>44</sup> See *Costly Unity*: 1997, 14.

with the spirit of the boundless love of the triune God.<sup>45</sup> In this regard, *Costly Unity* asserts that *koinonia* in conciliar structures allow that controversy be dealt with in love and responsibility.<sup>46</sup> One can argue that in the case of the DR family of churches, which is comprised of different racial groups, embracing unity in diversity will be more challenging, especially in undressing the stigma of the apartheid that caused harm to the church and society.

In addition to the aspects referred to in the previous section, the report also in the seventh place discusses the relationship with movements and other faith as well as non-Christian groups, which seem to be a significant move towards church's commitment to JPIC issues. *Costly Unity* argues clearly that the perspective of the JPIC is that much of the energy in seeking justice and peace is to be found in groups of this kind, as they bear vital witness to official church bodies.<sup>47</sup> In South Africa for instance, this cooperation of different faith groups on issues of church and social development is being carried out by the National Religious Association for Social Development (NRASD). These faith communities, together with Faith-Based Organizations (FBO's) and Non-Governmental Organizations (NGO's) often work together on issues of justice, peace and social contexts development.

*Costly Unity* pleads that relationships with people of other faiths or no faith must be kept and that a better *koinonia* in collaborating with people outside Christian faith in our commitment to JPIC issues must be recommended. The significance of this plea relates to the fact that was already discussed in the previous chapter, which argued that the world may sometimes teach the church to be a better church. For *Costly Unity*, our own faith as Christians and our vision of the gospel should always guide us as we reach out to others.<sup>48</sup> However, Christians still need to learn how to work with other faith communities, especially on socio-ethical issues. One can state that this tension is also seen within the South African context where interreligious ecumenical bodies such as the National Religious Leaders Forum (NRLF – formed by the late President Nelson Mandela was disbanded in 2012 because it never functioned well after him), and the existing bodies such as National Religious Leaders Council (NRLC – launched November 2012), which never functioned since its establishment.

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<sup>45</sup> See Jojo and Fung *Taking a forward leap: Understanding proclamation, Church and Unity*. <http://eapi.admu.edu.ph/content/taking-forward-leap-understanding-proclamation-church-and-unity> [Accessed - 25/07/2013].

<sup>46</sup> See *Costly Unity*: 1997, 14.

<sup>47</sup> See *Costly Unity*: 1997, 15.

<sup>48</sup> See *Costly Unity*: 1997, 16.

A more detailed discussion will be shed on this aspect in the concluding chapter, especially with regard to the crisis of ecumenism and interreligious working relationships in South Africa. The *Costly Unity* report helps the church to understand that the unity we seek is costly and it must express itself in social contexts in a way of witnessing and responding to JPIC issues. The report also summarises the significance of church unity for social contexts by its reference to *koinonia* and its implications by emphasising the notion of *koinonia* with no boundaries. With this in mind, the church must engage itself to *Costly Commitment* towards its witness in social contexts.

### 4.3. Costly Commitment

The second consultation on *Costly Commitment* took place at the Tantur Ecumenical Institute in Israel in November 1994. It must be noted that at Rønne in Denmark the church was affirmed as moral community. This brought more debate and concerns and only at Tantur was this description of the church as moral community revisited. Konrad Raiser underscores that the misleading concept of moral community was replaced by the idea that in the church as *koinonia*, a constant process of moral formation takes place and a suggestion was made that this line must be followed up in the future reflection.<sup>49</sup> At Tantur, more emphasis was laid on the calling and vocation of the church and the notions of moral formation and discernment. The focus of the *Costly Commitment* consultation was on the role of moral formation within the life of the churches in relation to both their search for visible unity and to their witness in the world.<sup>50</sup> It can be argued that at this consultation at Tantur, the relationship between ecclesiology and ethics was kept and emphasised.

It must be noted that there is a link between what the church is and what the church does. These two notions of moral formation and discernment reveal that the life of the church must have a true reflection to the world and that we cannot disconnect the church's life from its witness and service to the world. In what follows, I will discuss the report's Tantur convictions that aimed at linking ecclesiology and ethics together, the questions of *koinonia*-generating involvement, Eucharist, covenant and ethical engagement, and the moral formation and discernment.

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<sup>49</sup> See K. Raiser 1996. "Ecumenical Discussion of Ethics and Ecclesiology": *Ecumenical Review*, Volume 48, No 1, January, 1996, 9.

<sup>50</sup> See *Costly Commitment*: 1997, 24.

#### 4.3.1 Towards the relationship between Ecclesiology and Ethics

The first section of *Costly Commitment* gives an introductory discussion of the relationship between ecclesiology and ethics. *Costly Commitment* asserts that churches have learned to reflect and act together in and via the ecumenical movement. *Costly Commitment* further notes the continuing divisions amongst churches, especially on fundamental matters of faith, order, life and work that prevent them from offering a unified witness on crucial ethical issues. These divisions amongst the churches reveal the brokenness of their *koinonia*, and hamper their prophetic mission and service in the world.<sup>51</sup> It must be noted that these kinds of church divisions also have a negative impact towards social contexts. But their unity works exactly the opposite in social contexts.

As a result of this reason, the third world conference on Faith and Order at Lund, Sweden on 15-28 August 1952 pleaded with the churches to work together when it asked, whether our churches should not ... act together in all matters except those in which deep differences of conviction compel them to act separately?<sup>52</sup> It can be said that most of these differences and divisions between the churches results from faith and order matters, and this also influenced the church's response to ethical concerns. *Church and World* (discussion in chapter 2 of this dissertation) wrestles with the same tension of the churches that opt to work in separate ways on ethical issues of concern that face them. This deals with the challenge raised by Peter Lodberg in relation to the ethical function of the church when he argues that the unity of the church is tested in our daily life conflicts, as well as on how churches respond to social, political and economic conflicts as this reflects the quality of the conciliar fellowship in the church.<sup>53</sup>

It must be noted that the need to relate ecclesiology and ethics took a special urgency and became a fundamental theme in the work of the ecumenical movement. The need for this urgency was because of the complexity and severity of the contemporary challenges confronting humanity and the whole creation. Part of the problems confronting humanity and creation are not only for nations struggling to find peace with their neighbours, but also for

<sup>51</sup> See *Costly Commitment*: 1997, 25.

<sup>52</sup> See *Costly Commitment*: 1997, 25. Since this conference at Lund in 1952, some efforts to foster working relations and common witness and action amongst churches were made by the ecumenical movement. The World Council of Churches' Programme to Combat Racism during the 1970s expresses the churches commitment to act together.

<sup>53</sup> See P. Lodberg, 1995. "The History of Ecumenical Work on the Ecclesiology and Ethics": *Ecumenical Review* Volume 47: No. 2. April 1995, 131.



societies seeking to build up their moral fibre where the churches have been repressed for a number of years.<sup>54</sup> In the concluding chapter I will comment in more detail on the role of the church regarding the moral fibre of society by referring to the South African society, where Christian church leaders at their consultation declared the country to be on the confines of moral decay. It can further be argued that although there are other stakeholders in society who could help with the moral fibre in society, in general, the church seems to be the most trusted one. For *Costly Commitment* it is because of the full awareness of such situations that the relationship between ecclesiology and ethics is explored and this relationship touches on issues of life and death, of deep conviction and commitment. As *Costly Commitment* puts it: “Here we deal with a fundamental vocation of the church and of Christians who work together in facing crucial issues of today.”<sup>55</sup> *Costly Commitment* further emphasises the necessity for the churches to work together on social and ethical issues they faced in the world today.

In line with *Costly Commitment*, Dirkie Smit emphatically states that the churches, even as moral communities are called to commit themselves to one another, recognising that they need each other on the ecumenical journey. Such commitment is an essential foundation for their common reflection and action.<sup>56</sup> Furthermore, it becomes increasingly evident that the road to a costly unity leads necessarily through a costly commitment of the churches to one another.<sup>57</sup>

The American theologian Lewis Mudge makes an important remark in this regard when he argues that if the church is not fully the church, in the sense of being a theologically-principled way of life in its own right, then any moral engagement with the world outside, any engaged concern for general human well-being, is going to end with distinctiveness in the faith being swallowed up in platitudes.<sup>58</sup> For Mudge, clues to the unity of the church we seek are present in the world because God is at work there. Mudge also underscores that it is of the *esse*, the being of the church, to have certain worldly tasks to become an interpreter of the signs pointing towards the kingdom of God, as well as to take an active part in the realisation

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<sup>54</sup> See *Costly Commitment*: 1997, 26.

<sup>55</sup> See *Costly Commitment*: 1997, 26.

<sup>56</sup> See D. J. Smit, 2003:3. “Living Unity? On the Ecumenical Movement and Globalisation”: In- *Scriptura* 84, 2003, 429. See also *Costly Commitment*: 1997, 26.

<sup>57</sup> See *Costly Commitment*: 1997, 26-27.

<sup>58</sup> See L. Mudge, 1996. “Ecclesiology and Ethics in Current Ecumenical Debate”: *Ecumenical Review*, Volume 48, No 1, January 1996, 13.



of the signs.<sup>59</sup> Given the above mentioned tensions amongst the churches regarding their commitment to each other in finding ways of working together on life and death challenges facing them, the *Costly Commitment* consultation at Tantur agreed on five basic convictions as a guide towards this commitment.

#### 4.3.2 Tantur: Basic convictions

After the discussion on the relationship between ecclesiology and ethics, the report underlines five basic convictions that were agreed upon at Tantur, which undergird the efforts to link ecclesiology and ethics together.

The first conviction that was agreed upon during *Costly Commitment* at Tantur was the significance of the ecumenical dimension. A number of urgent questions came up from the conviction that unity and ethical engagement, ecclesiology and ethics belong together. In this regard, awareness grew amongst the consultation delegates that they are meeting in Jerusalem, a “city of peace”, as they listened to the experiences of Christians working together for peace, justice and for the care of creation and these factors made the consultation aware of the ecumenical dimension of their work.<sup>60</sup> *Costly Commitment* states that despite all the challenges that took place, the ecumenical struggles of recent decades have left important moral deposits, such as the reverence for the dignity of all persons as creatures of God, equality of women and men, the option for the poor, the rejection of racial barriers, and a strong “no” to nuclear armaments, to mention but a few. *Costly Commitment* further states that churches have not yet grasped the full implications of this decisive ecumenical dimension; hence, they have not fully realised that a costly unity requires a costly commitment to one another. The Tantur consultation emphasised the significance of the ethical engagement as intrinsic to the church.

The second conviction had to do with the ecumenical journey. At Tantur, the vocation of the church and its meaning was again explored within the Trinitarian work of reconciliation, healing and transformation. *Costly Commitment* became aware of the fact that through the ecumenical movement’s success and failures in history, the quest for unity and the struggle for justice are an integral part of the life of the church and should be kept together. It must be noted that the *Costly Commitment* consultation advocates church unity that in a way that does

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<sup>59</sup> See Mudge, “Ecclesiology and Ethics in Current Ecumenical Debate”: 1996, 13.

<sup>60</sup> See *Costly Commitment*: 1997, 28.

not disconnect it from church's witness and service in the world. In this regard, the *koinonia* shared by Christians and churches is increasingly a source of inspiration and challenge for their further work on issues of ecclesiology and ethics.<sup>61</sup> The challenge for the churches is that common reflection and action, common confession, mission; witness and service should be their norm and not an exception for their lives today.

The third conviction affirms that the church is God's gracious gift to us and that this grace calls forth and shapes the moral life of disciples, and that we totally rely on God's forgiveness and renewing grace in our faithfulness and infidelity, in our virtue and our sin.<sup>62</sup> In this regard Rasmussen states that the churches acting as full moral communities help to shape both character and particular choices and actions people take, individually and together. He further indicates that at the same time, the churches teach and embody virtues, values, obligations and moral visions.<sup>63</sup> The church does not rest on moral achievement, but on justification, on God's justice and not our own. As stated earlier at Rønne by *Costly Unity*, again at Tantur *Costly Commitment* reaffirms that whilst the church is not constituted by or dependent for its ongoing existence upon the moral activities of its members, the holiness of the church calls for their constant moral struggle. As *Costly Commitment* emphatically puts it: "In the living Christian community there can be no ecclesiology without ethics and no ethics without ecclesiology."<sup>64</sup>

The affirmation by *Costly Commitment* gives a clearer picture of the necessity of the theme of this dissertation on church unity and social contexts. It also sheds some light perhaps on the question of this study on the significance of church unity with its relation to social contexts. Rasmussen alludes to this point when he argues that the church as moral community is meaningless apart from concrete moral substance.<sup>65</sup> These affirmations strongly emphasise that the nature and the calling of the church are interrelated. It becomes increasingly clear that ecclesiology and ethics cannot be separated; they belong together. *Costly Commitment* asserts that the traditional marks of the church, which are oneness, catholicity, apostolicity and holiness, must all be expressed in the moral life of its members, as they are central expressions of what it means to be the body of Christ.

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<sup>61</sup> See *Costly Commitment*: 1997, 29.

<sup>62</sup> See *Costly Commitment*: 1997, 30.

<sup>63</sup> See Rasmussen, *Moral Community and Moral Formation*: 1995, 183.

<sup>64</sup> See *Costly Commitment*: 1997, 30.

<sup>65</sup> See Rasmussen, *Moral Community and Moral Formation*: 1995, 185.

In the fourth place, Tantur agreed that hope and memory are the resources for Christian engagement. *Costly Commitment* states that the church does not bring about the kingdom of God, but through its life as witnessing and serving community is part of the coming kingdom and is looking forward to the coming kingdom with hope. The kingdom of God is described and fully understood as a gift and that its full actualisation is the work of God; the members of the church are co-workers with God in implementing the values of the kingdom in the world.<sup>66</sup> It must be noted that the church itself, in its own life must reflect these values of the kingdom such as peace, love and reconciliation. Hence, the church is called a peacemaker; it must carry this in its own life and is the foretaste of the coming kingdom. *Costly Commitment* further demonstrates the ethical reflection and engagement of the church as taking place in the future, past and present. According to *Costly Commitment*, the response of the church to the issues of the day is enlivened by its hope for the coming kingdom, the disturbing memory (*anamnesis*) of Jesus Christ, and the sanctifying and renewing power of the Spirit.<sup>67</sup> It can be argued that in this way the church does not only focus on itself and its own life, but is called to be in solidarity with the whole creation.

The last conviction of Tantur describes ethics as a general human enterprise, meaning that to be a human is to be a moral agent. This point is also made by Ernst Conradie in his description of ethics in the book titled *Morality as a way of life: A first introduction to ethical theory*. Conradie recalls that the word ethics developed as a result of the emergence of philosophy, especially in ancient Greece. He develops his argument to state that ethics now came to imply behaviour according to reason and had to be based on thorough reflection. In philosophical reflections, he says, one had to provide reasons for acting in a particular way.<sup>68</sup> Conradie further underscores that ethics called morality into question and reflected on the very basis (rules, principles, criteria), which may be used to distinguish between what is “right” and what is “wrong” and in this way, the task of ethics is to investigate morality, to assess morality and to make moral recommendations.<sup>69</sup>

Dirkie Smit, in his article titled *Reformed ethics and economic justice?* draws us closer to the analysis of James Gustafson on ethics to see what we do when we speak from an ethical

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<sup>66</sup> See *Costly Commitment*: 1997, 31.

<sup>67</sup> See *Costly Commitment*: 1997, 32.

<sup>68</sup> See E. Conradie, 2006. *Morality as a way of life: A first introduction to ethical theory. Study Guides in Religion and Theology*10, University of the Western Cape, SUN PRESS, 2006, 2.

<sup>69</sup> See Conradie, *Morality as a way of life*: 2006, 2.

perspective. Smit points out that according to Gustafson's documents, there are four different ways of speaking ethically, namely prophetic discourse, narrative discourse, policy discourse, and ethical discourse in a narrow, technical sense. In his analysis of ethical language in a narrower, technical sense, Gustafson states that the documents ask questions of meaning, of logic, conceptual questions, philosophical questions. For Smit, all these documents in four radically different ways are forms of moral discourse and they all speak from an ethical perspective and about morality.<sup>70</sup> From the analysis of Gustafson on ethical discourse, Smit builds his argument on how we speak ethically by considering morality or the content of ethical enquiry from three different questions, namely: What constitutes a good and moral society? What constitutes good and moral people? What constitutes good and moral decision-making? These questions are mainly dealing with each human as a moral agent and how each individual's behaviour contributes positively or negatively the level of morality in society.

However, Smit points out that the first set of questions focuses on a good society, asking philosophical and social questions related to what justice is and how the economy works. The second set of questions deals with an ethics of being. In this regard, we ask ourselves what kind of people we are and what kind of people we want to be. Amongst these questions of being, we further ask what kind of community we belong to. Smit states that the questions of identity and character become significant in this regard. The third set of questions addresses an ethics of doing. With these set of questions on an ethics of doing, we focus on moral issues. According to Smit we look at what is right and what is wrong, as well as what should be done with regard to this and that.<sup>71</sup> It must be noted that these set of questions are interrelated with each other and are very helpful for social transformation and building up morally good citizens. *Costly Commitment* underscores that Christian ethics relates to the church and to the wider creation and strongly rooted in and shaped by the Eucharistic community and it does not stand far from the moral struggles of humankind.<sup>72</sup> In a sense, Christian ethics must strive to relate with other forms of secular ethics and also to ways in which humankind face moral issues.

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<sup>70</sup> See D. J. Smit, 2007. "Reformed ethics and economic justice?" *Essays in Public Theology, Collected Essays 1, Study Guides in Religion and Theology 12*, University of the Western Cape, 2007, 380.

<sup>71</sup> See Smit, Reformed ethics and economic justice? 2007, 380-381.

<sup>72</sup> See *Costly Commitment*: 1997, 32.

### 4.3.3 Towards the notion of *koinonia*-generating involvement

During the fifth world conference of Faith and Order at Santiago de Compostela, which is discussed in chapter three of this study, the sensitive issue of *koinonia*-generating involvement was considered. *Costly Commitment* recalls that it was affirmed at that conference that in many places and at different levels, *koinonia*-generating involvement in the struggles of humanity is taking place. *Costly Commitment* recognises in these common involvements an urgent, real, but imperfect *koinonia*, and also urge the Faith and Order commission to give priority to lifting up and clarifying their ecclesiological implications.<sup>73</sup> However, the quest for fuller *koinonia* amongst churches and their members is seen as an urgent need and essential aspect of the ecclesial and ethical dynamic amongst those engaged in the ecumenical movement. It can be argued that *Costly Commitment* sees the weakness of *koinonia* and the lack of unity amongst churches as the major stumbling block towards their witness and service in social contexts.

*Costly Commitment* notes that *Costly Unity* refers to two contexts in which common engagement in ethical issues may raise ecclesologically fundamental questions. The first one deals with the sense of participation and commitment experienced in Christian movements, which may not feel the sense of accountability that should be present in the established organs of the church. The second one deals with the issues of cooperation with people of good will outside the Christian faith and this points to another experience that is beyond the confines of the church in which persons who do not claim to be Christians may share specific moral goals and actions with Christians.<sup>74</sup> This shows a sense of community that arises from common reflection and engagement on ethical issues of today. However, this cooperation of Christian faith with other people of good will outside Christianity is operational in South Africa under the auspices of the NRASD. But it must be noted that even though the ethical engagement on ethical issues of today takes place in a form of dialogue, there is awareness that there are also major differences in dealing with these issues.

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<sup>73</sup> See *Costly Commitment*: 1997, 33-34.

<sup>74</sup> See *Costly Commitment*: 1997, 34-35.

#### 4.3.4 The relationship between the Eucharist and Covenant

The relationship between ecclesiology and ethics has been understood in different ways by Christian traditions. During the *Costly Commitment* consultation at Tantur, convergence was discovered through the notion of covenant in relationship to Eucharist. With regard to the Eucharist, *Costly Commitment* asserts that in the Eucharist, Christians living in the world are involved in joys, sufferings and even expectations of humankind, which come together in response to God's calling. When Christians partake in the same body and blood of Christ, they are called to a love without limits, whilst at the same time they are called to transcend all barriers in their celebrating community and in the world. This means that all barriers of isolation, of division, lack of reconciliation and discrimination are being transcended and radically challenged in the celebration of the Eucharist. For *Costly Commitment*, the Eucharist is also the meal of the kingdom, a foretaste of God's final fulfilment in store for humanity and creation.<sup>75</sup> These Eucharist dimensions imply a true and demanding commitment to witness and service in social contexts. This highlights the fact that in the Eucharist there is an ethical engagement element.

With regard to the ethical dimension in the Eucharist in BEM, Duncan Forrester states that BEM reckons that it is in the Eucharist that the community of God's people is fully manifested and that the Eucharist embraces all aspects of life. Its celebration demands reconciliation and sharing amongst all those regarded as brothers and sisters in the one family of God and in a constant challenge in the search for appropriate relationships in social, economic, and political life.<sup>76</sup> According to Forrester, BEM also emphasises that all kinds of injustice, racism, separation and lack of freedom are radically challenged when we share in the body and blood of Christ. Forrester concludes and say that we need to recover ways in which the Eucharist may be a healing, effective, transforming sign (*and perhaps symbol*)<sup>77</sup> –

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<sup>75</sup> See *Costly Commitment*: 1997, 37.

<sup>76</sup> See D. Forrester, 1995. "Ecclesiology and Ethics: A Reformed Perspective". *Ecumenical Review*, Volume 47, No 2, April 1995, 151.

<sup>77</sup> My preference for the Eucharist as transforming symbol instead of a sign is in line with Dirkie Smit's distinction between a symbol and a sign in his article titled: "The symbol of reconciliation and ideological conflict in South Africa". 2007. *Essays in Public Theology, Collected Essays 1 in Ernst Conradie (ed.), Study Guides in Religion and Theology 12, University of the Western Cape*. Dirkie Smit argues in this article that a symbol is something more than just a sign of something else. It represents an idea, a truth, and a belief, a value, which is regarded by people as extremely important and dear to them. Smit further explains that it is the kind of idea or event that can move people to tears that can inspire them to action that can quicken their heartbeat, (see D. Smit, 2007, 288). This is exactly what the Eucharist does to us as Christians as we remember what God has done for us through the suffering of His own Son on the cross on our behalf. For Smit, symbols also play a very

my emphasis) of community and of hope today, as well as of commitment to the overcoming of division.”<sup>78</sup>

With regard to the covenant, *Costly Commitment* describes the covenant as an expression of God’s will for humankind and creation, and that it creates an indestructible relationship between the living church gathered for worship and the church as it is church in the world.<sup>79</sup> According to *Costly Commitment*, in the Old and New Testaments, a covenant expressed according to Christians clearly in the life, death and resurrection of Jesus Christ finds a special expression in the celebration of the Eucharist. Hence, this celebration itself called “testament” or “*koinonia*” in which this *koinonia* describes the ethical engagement of Christians on the collection of money for the poor in Jerusalem and such act is *koinonia* itself not just a sign of it.<sup>80</sup>

From the perspective of South African theological history, Dirkie Smit critically argues against the notion that South African apartheid discourse was covenantal discourse. Smit argues that the covenant metaphors, covenant language and covenant ethics did not really play this role in Afrikaner Reformed thought and in apartheid society.<sup>81</sup> He further states that fundamental ideas later used to undergird the apartheid myth were certainly covenantal, especially the awareness of being a chosen people, the sense of calling, mission, purpose, or duty, the importance of identity, of remaining separate and pure, the promise of land, and the association with the Old Testament people of God. Smit concludes that the expression “covenant” was seldom used within this religious, ideological and political myth.<sup>82</sup> According to Smit, there are four significant covenant discourses in South Africa today, namely: doctrinal discourse, an ecclesiological discourse, an ecumenical, and a political-ethical discourse.<sup>83</sup> But it is very important to highlight under the ecumenical covenant discourse that

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significant role during processes of social transformation and that religious symbols too can play a powerful role in the social construction of reality, including the social transformation of reality, he says (2007, 81).

<sup>78</sup> See Forrester, “Ecclesiology and Ethics”: 1995, 152.

<sup>79</sup> See *Costly Commitment*: 1997, 37.

<sup>80</sup> See *Costly Commitment*: 1997, 37.

<sup>81</sup> See D. J. Smit, 2007. “Covenant and Ethics? Comments from a South African Perspective”. *Essays in Public Theology, Collected Essays 1* in Ernst Conradie (ed.), Study Guides in Religion and Theology 12, University of the Western Cape, 2007, 211-212.

<sup>82</sup> See Smit, “Covenant and Ethics? 2007, 212.

<sup>83</sup> See Smit, Covenant and Ethics? (2007, 215-223). Smit explains that the doctrinal covenant discourse refers to the use of the Biblical and typically Reformed notion of covenant in *dogmatics*, especially in soteriology. For Smit, covenant thought has played a major role in the work of almost all prominent Afrikaans-speaking Reformed theologians of the past decades, and therefore, is present in South African systematic theological reflection on the doctrines of creation, of humanity, of sin, of Christ, of salvation, of election, of the Holy Spirit,



already in 1948 in the message of the First Assembly of the World Council of Churches, the idea of “covenant” and “covenanting” was used. In that message of the First Assembly the following declaration was made:

Here at Amsterdam we have committed ourselves afresh to (God our Father, and our Lord Jesus Christ, who gathers together in one the children of God that are scattered abroad), and have covenanted with one another in constituting the World Council of Churches. We intend to stay together, the Assembly declared. Further, we call upon Christian congregations everywhere to endorse and fulfil this covenant in their relations with one another, the First Assembly declared.<sup>84</sup>

Again, Smit points out another significant statement by the World Alliance of Reformed Churches’ (WARC) Executive Committee in February 1983 titled: *A Covenant for Peace and Justice*, declared these two ethical issues to be inseparable and challenging Christian churches, whatever their tradition, to form a covenant for peace and justice. According to Smit, from this statement they suggested the preparation and summoning of a special ecumenical gathering under the auspices of the WCC where all churches could covenant together. It was on the Sixth Assembly of the WCC in 1983 where a decision was taken to make “Justice, Peace, and the Integrity of Creation” one of the priority areas for all the programmes and activities of the WCC by engaging all member churches in a conciliar process of mutual commitment (covenant) to justice, peace and the integrity of all creation.<sup>85</sup> Given the message from the First Assembly of the WCC on covenant and covenanting, as well as the statement by the Executive Committee of the WARC on the commitment to justice

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of the sacraments, of eschatology, of the Holy scripture (covenant theology poses the unity of the Bible, Smit says). The Ecclesiology covenant discourse refers to a very strong discourse in South African Reformed circles, especially in the so-called (Potchefstroom-based) “Reformed Church” with strong ties to Amsterdam and Grand Rapids, Dirkie Smit explains. He further states that the true church is seen as God’s covenant people, receivers of God’s promises and carriers of God’s message. Baptism makes people part of the covenant. Covenant education, the formation of covenant people, the collective identity of the covenant community, the church as a community of covenant character, are all significant notions, Smit argues. The ecumenical covenant discourse refers to the recent trend in the ecumenical movement, in the World Council itself, in international denominational bodies such as the World Alliance of Reformed Churches, and in bi-and multilateral processes amongst these bodies, to covenant with one another. Here Smit outlines that the verb “covenanting” becomes important as an indication of the ethical calling of believers, churches and human beings to cooperate and to take shared responsibility, especially towards ethical goals. Political-ethical covenant discourse refers to the way the Calvinist notion of covenant has been used in the history of political theory. Dirkie Smit points out that with the Reformation, and the availability of the Old and New Testaments or covenants in the hands of ordinary people, “covenant” became a rallying point for ecclesial, but also for social and political reform and radical obedience to the Word of God. A development to this discourse was caused by the fact that Calvin’s covenant, *foedus*, or alliance, was also translated as *federal*, Smit says. See Smit, *Covenant and Ethics?* (2007, 215-223).

<sup>84</sup> See Smit, *Covenant and Ethics?* 2007, 218.

<sup>85</sup> See Smit, *Covenant and Ethics?* 2007, 220.



and peace, it becomes evident that *Costly Commitment* was trying to re-emphasise the significance of Christians and churches commitment to one another in the form of a covenant and towards their calling and witness in social contexts. This emphasises the significance of the unity of the church and its implications towards society.

In addition to this discussion on Eucharist and Covenant, *Costly Commitment* argues that in relation to a Christian understanding, the *koinonia* experienced in the Eucharist and the *koinonia* experienced in ethical engagement are both seen as expressions of the covenant, each in its own way as an active remembering or “re-presenting” of the covenant between God, humankind and creation.<sup>86</sup> The Eucharist and the ethical engagement experiences of the same *koinonia* are totally interdependent on each other and cannot be separated.

#### 4.3.5 On Moral Formation and Discernment

The *Costly Commitment* consultation reaffirmed the conviction that ethics belong to the being of the church and in doing this, a reflection was made on the notions of moral formation and discernment.<sup>87</sup> According to *Costly Commitment*, churches are expected to provide important moral resources both for their own members and the wider world and this involves spiritual formation and moral formation as a task of the churches.<sup>88</sup> As part of this task for the churches, *Costly Commitment* puts forward the task of discernment training in order to help church members to analyse ethical issues from the perspective of the gospel and preparing them to judge how best to participate in the light of their faith in the moral struggles, complexities and challenges of the present day.<sup>89</sup> With regard to this perspective, it can be said that it seems that moral formation and discernment was lacking from the Dutch Reformed Church during its involvement in apartheid in South Africa. For this church to stand on the side of injustice and analyse ethical issues such as racism and apartheid on the grounds of the Scriptures, spells out the lack of a moral compass. However, this created

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<sup>86</sup> See *Costly Commitment*: 1997, 38.

<sup>87</sup> See *Costly Commitment*: 1997, 39.

<sup>88</sup> See *Costly Commitment*: 1997, 39.

<sup>89</sup> See *Costly Commitment*: 1997, 39.

The whole issue of discernment is a vital exercise, but Christians must take cognisance of other faith groups that exist in their respective communities. Here, the notion of *koinonia* plays a vital role in terms of taking a decision on moral struggles together as people of faith knowing the reality and the experiences of their respective communities. The third world conference of Faith and Order at Lund in 1952 states: “*Should not our churches....act together in all matters except those in which deep differences of conviction compel them to act separately?*” This question will always challenge not only the Christian community, but also other faith and non-faith people pertaining to many issues related to ecclesiology and ethics debate.

lasting divisions within the DR family of churches and the South African society. Hence, the unification of these churches could in turn play a significant role in the South Africa context. This is extremely important, as we all understand that the task of discerning God's will becomes more difficult when we face all these ethical challenges and complexities in the world today.

According to *Costly Commitment*, the language of "moral formation" clarifies and takes forward the discussion of the church as "moral community" as explored at Rønde. However, this language asserts that the church and its members are necessarily moral agents whose actions reflect, consciously or unconsciously, their values and convictions.<sup>90</sup> Rasmussen observes that human beings are aware of a gap or a difference; the difference of "is" from "ought", as they are also aware of moral agency. He further states that human beings make moral judgments between good and evil.<sup>91</sup>

Ernst Conradie describes three types of ethical languages; namely, prescriptive language, descriptive language and meta-ethical language. Conradie states that prescriptive ethics is a form of disciplined reflection that seeks to propose appropriate forms of moral behaviour. In prescriptive ethics, the moral language is often prescriptive, especially in the form of religious instruction, parental guidance or the household rules of institutions. I want to argue that for Christians, the main source of the prescriptive ethics is the Bible. We look at the world through the Bible and discern what God wills us to do with regards to life and death ethical issues. For Conradie, the critical reflection on prescriptive moral language is not necessarily prescriptive in nature. He argues that one can simply describe, as accurately as possible, the way in which prescriptive behaviour functions within a particular context and that is precisely the task of descriptive ethics. Descriptive ethics seeks to describe and analyse moral language without making moral judgments.<sup>92</sup> In his description of meta-ethical language, Conradie explains that both prescriptive and descriptive ethics reflect on specific moral issues and this led to various highly specialised sub-disciplines in the field of ethics with the inclusion of economic, political, medical, environmental, personal, business, and animal ethics to mention but a few. Conradie states that this is a different case of what is called meta-ethics. Meta-ethics is a reflection on ethics itself and it does not investigate particular moral issues. But it

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<sup>90</sup> See *Costly Commitment*: 1997, 40.

<sup>91</sup> See Rasmussen, *Moral Community and Moral Formation*: 1995, 181.

<sup>92</sup> See Conradie, *Morality as a way of life*: 2006, 4-5.

focuses on the nature of morality and it analyses the basis upon which people make moral judgments.<sup>93</sup>

For *Costly Commitment*, the church's role is seen as taking stands on issues of the day through educational campaigns, through works of mercy and through the quality of its own community life. At Tantur, the language of "moral formation" and "discernment" was explored with the hope that it can carry forward the discussion of the ethical nature of the church and its implications for the life of the church in the world. *Costly Commitment* does not regard moral formation as an alternative to moral community affirmed at Rønne, but as one explication and development of this view on the reality of the church.

*Costly Commitment* discovers the approach to moral formation and discernment as a helpful way to explore the church's nature and mission. However, according to *Costly Commitment*, the process of moral assessment will sometimes call the church in faith to sharp prophetic judgement upon society. It will sometimes lead the church to advocate a life-style that is counter to prevailing cultural values.<sup>94</sup> In a certain way, this also brings the church down to self-criticism, where it is reminded how the worldly forces and structures affect its own life as an institution, whilst at the same time, in other cases, in awareness and unawareness the church itself condones attitudes that allow injustice to go forth. In most cases, these attitudes of injustice can be traced to how women are treated in the churches and how men dominate women using the Scriptures.

*Costly Commitment* also sees the language of moral formation and discernment helpful in various ways for the ecumenical discussion, as it could help in considering the traditional marks of the church as developed in terms of the Christian moral life: The "oneness" of the church, which implies that its members should act so as to deepen their love and communion, and the "catholicity" of the church, which implies the behaviour that is welcoming of diversity within community.<sup>95</sup> Rasmussen contends for repeated communal activities that are morally educative and forming, such as the Eucharist.<sup>96</sup>

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<sup>93</sup> See Conradie, *Morality as a way of life*: 2006, 5.

<sup>94</sup> See *Costly Commitment*: 1997, 41.

<sup>95</sup> See *Costly Commitment*: 1997, 42.

<sup>96</sup> See Rasmussen, *Moral Community and Moral Formation*: 1995, 183-184.

*Costly Commitment* further explores the *ekklesia* as a saving, Eucharistic and covenantal “household of faith”, which describes the ethical character of the church. *Costly Commitment* asserts that when speaking of the “*ethos* of the household of faith” it means the way of life, the distinctive patterns of thinking, feeling and acting, which characterise those who live within that household.<sup>97</sup> It can further be argued that this metaphor of the household of faith indicates and reflects to the visible unity of the church we seek on the one hand, and also on the impact of this unity to social contexts on the other hand. Within the household there are two issues that the members’ wrestle with; first, to keep the unity within the household and in the second place, to maintain peace, reconciliation and justice within the household. The household metaphor points beyond itself, by taking into account the situation and well-being of those outside it. Conradie argues that the household of God metaphor is able to integrate a variety of ecumenical social concerns within a larger framework including the integrity of the biophysical foundations of this house, the economic management of the household’s affairs, the need for peace and reconciliation amidst ethnic, religious and domestic violence within the single household, a concern for issues of health and education, the place of women and children within this household, and an ecumenical sense of the unity not only of the church, but also of the whole human community and God’s creation.<sup>98</sup> This metaphor of the household of faith points directly to the local household of faith in each place and also beyond the local to the ecumenical movement, the universal church and the *oikoumene*. Konrad Raiser highlights the significance of this biblical concept of the *oikos*, the house or household of life, stating that the relatedness of life in ecological, economic and ecumenical terms can be adequately conveyed by this metaphor.<sup>99</sup>

*Costly Commitment* also reveals that the household concept (*oikos*) relates to the witness of the church to the economic and ecological realities of our world, which contradict the message of the reign of God. It must be noted that the Accra Confession, which also deals with ecclesiology and ethics, uses the household term in relation to church’s stance on economic injustices caused by globalisation.<sup>100</sup> *Costly Commitment* states that the household concept points equally to the ethical accountability of the universal church, in relation both to

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<sup>97</sup> See *Costly Commitment*: 1997, 43.

<sup>98</sup> See Conradie, *Notions and Forms of Ecumenicity*: 2013, 54-55.

<sup>99</sup> See Raiser, *Ecumenical Discussion of Ethics and Ecclesiology*: 1996, 9.

<sup>100</sup> See Accra Confession: <http://www.ucc.org/justice/globalization/pdfs/accra-new-final.pdf> [Accessed 11 November 2013].

the local church and to the global concerns for justice, peace and the integrity of creation.”<sup>101</sup> In this regard Conradie points out that in the context of *oiko*-theology, the household of God cannot be conceived in crude anthropocentric terms as a communion of human beings. The household includes more than family members, friends, neighbours, visitors, foreigners and – in African terms – the communion between living and the dead. It includes domestic animals, livestock, food supplies, clothing, furniture, appliances, energy supplies, water supplies, gardens, trees, flowers, soil, and all the building materials of the house itself. For Conradie, the earth itself is ultimately the larger house which human beings inhabit together with multiple other forms of life.<sup>102</sup>

The core and the fundamental issue of the concept of the household of faith is the communion of the members within the household. It can therefore be argued that within such a household of faith, unity, justice, equality, and dignity of all humankind takes priority. *Costly Commitment* is correct when stating that a true understanding of *oikos* excludes the suppression of some members of the community by others, but encourages the full use of each person’s gifts and also celebrates the variety of cultures and communities found within the one household.<sup>103</sup> I want to argue that this remark is helpful for the understanding of the unity we seek within the DR family of churches. However, this approach means that ethics of peace, reconciliation and justice starts within the household of God and must be embodied by the members of the household. The unity of the DR family of churches must reflect the meaning and the kind of life within the household of God, an ecclesiology that embodies unity and ethics. Such unity must find expression in witness and service of this family of churches in social contexts. Within the household of faith, Christians must commit themselves to each other as they have a huge task of nourishing their relationships with each other, including the values that would help them to form and sustain a just society. Tantur has learned that the efforts for moral formation in society have had an ecclesial significance and that through these efforts; the church has learned how to be church better. A further discussion on moral formation and discernment was carried out at the consultation on *Costly Obedience*.

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<sup>101</sup> See *Costly Commitment*: 1997, 43-44.

<sup>102</sup> See Conradie, *Notions and Forms of Ecumenicity*: 2013, 55.

<sup>103</sup> See *Costly Commitment*: 1997, 44.

#### 4.4. Costly Obedience

The *Costly Obedience* consultation took place in Johannesburg, South Africa 19-23 June 1996. In Johannesburg, *Costly Obedience* further pursued the theme and discussion of moral formation by asking what it might mean to speak of the church as a global communion of moral witnessing. With this in mind, *Costly Obedience* affirmed that the obedience to which we are called as Christians is often costly. Given the significance of this affirmation, *Costly Obedience* further reckons that this obedience to which we are called may require the churches to position themselves in relation to the issues of particular times and places in ways that call for courage, perseverance and sacrifice. Such faithfulness may come to the point of martyrdom, *Costly Obedience* in Johannesburg said.<sup>104</sup> It is evident that *Costly Obedience* refers to life and death challenges of the world that requires the churches “to stand where God stands, against all injustices” (as articulated in the Belhar Confession). In most cases the churches find themselves in points of no return, where they need to respond prophetically in such situations. Responding prophetically in life and death challenges, the churches reveal their ethical engagement on issues of the day. It must be noted that the *Costly Obedience* consultation took place when South Africa was two years into a democracy, before which for long the church and many citizens had struggled against apartheid.

In Johannesburg, the delegates were moved to visit South Africa in the time of transition, but also saddened to learn of the growing unemployment and violence that have already overtaken this beloved country.<sup>105</sup> In fact, it must be noted that this is still the case in South Africa with regard to unemployment, escalating crime and violence, corruption and moral decay lately. A question can be asked whether all these challenges are the results of apartheid. Is it possible to blame apartheid for everything that is happening in our country today? Is it fair to state that it is because of apartheid that people have lost morality and human values such as Ubuntu and care? What lessons can we take from the past in order to make South Africa a morally good society with morally good citizens? What role can the churches play together in becoming a global communion of moral witnessing? *Costly Obedience* states that we live with violence perpetrated both in the name justice and in the name of resistance to justice’s demands.<sup>106</sup>

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<sup>104</sup> See *Costly Obedience*: 1997, 51.

<sup>105</sup> See *Costly Obedience*: 1997, 51.

<sup>106</sup> See *Costly Obedience*: 1997, 51.

In August 2012 we witnessed the violent death of striking miners in the North West in South Africa; about 34 mine workers were brutally murdered by police in Marikana whilst many of them were badly injured. These miners protested for a salary increase and refused to leave the mining industry premises until their demands are met. The question can be asked as to whether the violent response to their demands was really necessary. Were there no other means to respond justly to their demands? Was this a kind of resistance to justice's demands by the mining industry management? The intervention of the church under the leadership of the then president of the South African Council of Churches (SACC) Bishop Jo Seoka and president of the National Church Leaders' Consultation (NCLC) Archbishop Thabo Makgoba signalled the hope in the search for answers in this regard on the one hand, whilst also pointing to the role of the church in moral witnessing on the other hand.

*Costly Obedience* asserts that if the church is to fulfil its calling to be a sign of God's reign in such a situation, it is imperative that the church begins to understand itself as an ecumenical moral community. However, *Costly Obedience* further argues that the church needs to ask how – with all its theological, liturgical and sacramental resources – it can be a community of relevant moral witness for such a world.<sup>107</sup> In what follows, I will discuss the *Costly Obedience* report on the moral formation in the church and the world, formation and malformation, Eucharist and baptism for formation, and communion in moral witnessing.

#### 4.4.1. Towards moral formation in church and world

*Costly Obedience* discusses five significant meanings of moral formation in the church and the world. Firstly, with regard to moral formation and ethics, *Costly Obedience* states that the decision to combine ecclesiology with ethics by way of a study of moral formation has raised questions of terminology that need clarification. The Johannesburg consultation describes morality as reference to patterns of actual conduct, whilst ethics refers to systematic, often academic, reflection on that conduct. Furthermore, it explains that moral reflection or moral reasoning can refer to the thoughtful formulation of rules of conduct in the context of given traditions of life or spheres of communal experience.<sup>108</sup> *Costly Obedience* is aware of the fact that most of us live in situations where a plurality of religious and other life traditions makes it morally, as well as politically, impossible to build public policy on the moral reasoning

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<sup>107</sup> See *Costly Obedience*: 1997, 52.

<sup>108</sup> See *Costly Obedience*: 1997, 53.



offered by any one of them, or even on a supposed “overlapping consensus” representing many of them. In such situations, urgent issues arise and they need practical purposes to be resolved.

Ernst Conradie is of the opinion that in traditional rural communities the focus of moral reflection is on what is good for society, which is based on the homogeneous worldview of the community. Furthermore, within this worldview, Conradie states that people receive a particular sense of identity that shapes their moral convictions and daily lifestyle. In this regard, questions about what is right and wrong are answered in terms of this comprehensive worldview.<sup>109</sup> For Conradie, the moral emphasis in this situation is on what is good for society and this is addressed in terms of social cohesion and the well-being of the community. However, Conradie notes that moral formation in this situation is equated within cultural formation, an accepting role of responsibilities and the protection of the life and the interests of the community.<sup>110</sup> With this in mind, it becomes evident that the church is not the only place for moral formation. There must be working relations between the church and other institutions of moral formation in society. *Costly Obedience* states that formation within a particular faith community can generate indispensable resources for interaction with the world. It must be noted that Christian moral formation is important for Christian participation in the wider dialogue of human community.

Secondly, *Costly Obedience* focuses on the meaning of the notion of moral formation. In this regard, *Costly Obedience*, in line with Duncan Forrester, describes moral formation as a kind of nurturing in which a particular sense of our identity and what our destiny is, recognition of the community to which we belong and a pattern of motivation and ethical decision-making develop.<sup>111</sup> For *Costly Obedience*, such formation can be the gradual work of culture and upbringing and even self-conscious and intentional. Lewis Mudge asserts that any community of which we are members, in a certain way “forms” us in the sense of orienting us to the world and encouraging certain kinds of behaviour and discouraging others.<sup>112</sup> I must highlight

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<sup>109</sup> See Conradie, 2006. *Morality as a way of life*: 2006, 72.

<sup>110</sup> See Conradie, 2006. *Morality as a way of life*: 2006, 73.

<sup>111</sup> See *Costly Obedience*: 1997, 55. See also Forrester, *The True Church and Morality*: 1997, 79.

<sup>112</sup> See L. Mudge, 1996. *Ecclesiology and Ethics in Current Ecumenical Debate*: 1996, 13. Mudge states that an emphasis could have significant results for ecumenical thinking, especially for reaching useful insights in three areas: Firstly, it could move us away from an inferential model of ethical reasoning towards a nurturing model of moral upbringing. Secondly, it could point us towards emphasis on actual communities with their cultures: towards what anthropologists call complex “thickness” of lives actually lived. Lastly, it could also link up with the several historic traditions of Christian spirituality, leading us to reflection on the way human lives may be



the fact that even though Mudge is referring us to the community way of formation, there are some discouraged behaviours by the communities, especially with regard to sexual orientation, to mention one example. The manner in which the community discourage this behaviour places the lives of the victims in danger. In South Africa for instance, some gays and lesbians were brutally murdered in some communities, whilst other lesbians were being raped and such incidents were being done under the so-called “corrective rape” by males in the community. However, *Costly Obedience* observes that formation discussion turns sooner or later to the subject of spirituality, where it has come to mean the depth of daily existence, cultivated by both meditative and moral practices, and these two cannot be separated. Christian spiritual-moral formation needs not only to draw upon the riches of the great traditions of Christian faith, but also to meet, understand, grasp its differences from and learn from other spiritual traditions outside of Christianity, says *Costly Obedience*.<sup>113</sup> For this reason, Mudge argues that the notion of moral formation thus opens up an exceptionally rich perspective on the topic of ecclesiology and ethics.<sup>114</sup>

Thirdly, as for moral formation in the church, Christians are “formed” in specific ways in the faith community, through things such as its liturgy and teaching the texture of its common life.<sup>115</sup> Mudge echoes this perspective when he states that surely the church, whatever else it is, is a nurturer of moral awareness. He further states that there is no way of talking about Christian ethics without asking how the congregation functions in moral formation.<sup>116</sup> From Mudge’s perspective it becomes evident that ecclesiology and ethics are strongly related. One cannot speak of the church without referring to its ethical and moral conduct. For Mudge, to be in the Christian community is to be shaped in a certain way of life.<sup>117</sup> The whole discussion on moral formation in the church emphasises the ethical character of the church. One can argue that the moral formation in the church must have a solid foundation of moral formation in the family. The reason for this is that families are regarded as small congregations and there must be no difference between the nurturing of moral awareness at home and in the church. The unity and moral formation in family settings and the unity of the church can play a significant role in influencing moral standards in social contexts. Some questions can be

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oriented around ultimate concerns through different “exercises” of the Spirit. See Mudge, 1996. *Ecclesiology and Ethics in Current Ecumenical Debate*: 1996, 13-14.

<sup>113</sup> See *Costly Obedience*: 1997, 56.

<sup>114</sup> See Mudge, *Ecclesiology and Ethics in Current Ecumenical Debate*: 1996, 14.

<sup>115</sup> See *Costly Obedience*: 1997, 56.

<sup>116</sup> See Mudge, *Ecclesiology and Ethics in Current Ecumenical Debate*: 1996, 14.

<sup>117</sup> See Mudge, *Ecclesiology and Ethics in Current Ecumenical Debate*: 1996, 14.

asked in this regard: What can moral formation in the church offer towards the way of life in society? Can moral formation in the church help society to form and produce morally good citizens and good society?

In response to these challenging questions, Forrester argues that the formation within a specific church provides resources for life and action in the world. Forrester further states that different traditions have different ways of looking at the relation between ethics and moral formation on the one hand and the church on the other.<sup>118</sup> For Forrester, Christian formation has to do with centring and recentring, with conversion, with socialising, with character-building as well as with growth – as being conformed to Christ.<sup>119</sup> It is true to say that the life of each individual Christian must be conformed to Christ, meaning that our whole being must be like Christ. Mudge argues that as part of the forming role of the church, what people need and want is guidance in living their daily lives. We need to find a way to integrate personal moral issues with questions of social ethics and public weal, Mudge says.<sup>120</sup> Churches today are faced with a massive challenge for moral formation, especially with most of their members being involved in immoral behaviours such as stealing, corruption, rape and many other actions that are not fair to society.

Amongst other most fundamental formation in the church is the liturgical formation in the Lord's Supper and in our common baptism. *Costly Obedience* underscores that in this formation, no one can deny that ecclesiology and ethics go together and that to be a Christian is to be shaped in a certain way of life. However, *Costly Obedience* observes that when congregations speak of "formation" this becomes more of a challenge than an accomplishment and that congregations often are not doing it well. The weakness of this point is that congregations end up being ineffective communities of moral nurture.<sup>121</sup>

In the fourth place, the report addresses further the question of moral formation in and by the world. With regard to world formation, *Costly Obedience* notes that the world forms us through the shaping influence of principalities and powers. However, *Costly Obedience* states that we live in a multiplicity of cultural environments and engage in several different occupational and familial practices, and this literally make us multiple selves, formed in

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<sup>118</sup> See Forrester, *The True Church and Morality*: 1997, 79.

<sup>119</sup> See Forrester, *The True Church and Morality*: 1997, 79-80.

<sup>120</sup> See Mudge, *Ecclesiology and Ethics in Current Ecumenical Debate*: 1996, 15.

<sup>121</sup> See *Costly Obedience*: 1997, 57.

divergent ways by our lives in the church, in our families, in our secular occupations, in political and other activities.<sup>122</sup> All of these spheres of life are a distinct culture in its own right. The church relation to these entire cultural situations differs from place to place and the problem cannot be avoided. According to Mudge, we are formed as spiritual-moral beings; not only in church but also in the larger social world. He further states that we are members of many secular communities of formation; educational, occupational, financial, and political, and as Christians we are called to engage these diverse worlds in the name of the gospel.<sup>123</sup> In order to engage these secular formations, the church must consider the significance of its *koinonia*. It can be said the world formations are too strong for a divided church.

The last aspect that the report addresses in this regard concerns the interaction between the church and the world formations. A question could be asked as to whether churchly and worldly formations could interact or dialogue. *Costly Obedience* notes that the powers of worldly formation often impinge upon the church before the church has much chance to impinge upon them and this is transmitted through the media. However, *Costly Obedience* recalls the affirmation of Tantur that the world has at times taught us as Christians how to be the church and that we may learn what it is that the Christian tradition truly stands for from the movements in the world.<sup>124</sup> With reference to Tantur, Mudge observes that some of our most fundamental acts of witness have been drawn out by moral struggles in society in which the church has had to learn at least as much as it has taught. Mudge further argues that moral struggle, discernment and formation also challenge and teach us to learn from the world how better to recognise and ‘be’ church as a faithful way of life.<sup>125</sup>

According to Mudge, the kind of worldly formation we experience creates conditions for the kind of church-formed moral witness we are able, or have the vision to live out, whilst at the same time morally formed Christians could, by God’s, model their societies’ God-given possibilities.<sup>126</sup> Hence, one of the questions of this study asks is whether church unity can be a powerful source to influence morally good citizenship? Mudge advises that Christian moral witnessing needs to take cognisance of the kinds of values already present in the secular

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<sup>122</sup> See *Costly Obedience*: 1997, 58.

<sup>123</sup> See Mudge, *Ecclesiology and Ethics in Current Ecumenical Debate*: 1996, 16.

<sup>124</sup> See *Costly Obedience*: 1997, 59.

<sup>125</sup> See Mudge, *Ecclesiology and Ethics in Current Ecumenical Debate*: 1996, 17.

<sup>126</sup> See Mudge, *Ecclesiology and Ethics in Current Ecumenical Debate*: 1996, 18.

world and must find appropriate ways of relating to them.<sup>127</sup> According to *Costly Obedience*, churches became victims of their own success and they have taken over distorted ways of reading reality, and as second step, tried to elaborate such distortions theologically. The result of this is not formation in the faith, but rather malformation.<sup>128</sup> *Costly Obedience* contends that ecumenical ties are all important for maintaining identity in the faith and that we need a kind that will help local communities to remain ecumenically aware under the pressure of events which contain both threat and promise.

#### 4.4.2. Formation and malformation

With regard to formation and malformation, the *Costly Obedience* consultation strongly advised that if a church is not positioned where the gospel demands it to be amidst social forces and events, it will mal-form its members; hence, churches need ecumenical relationships.<sup>129</sup> Some concrete examples of these situations can be traced in the history of Europe and South Africa, in which the churches failed to locate themselves in relation to historic issues, as well as some cases where churches by God's grace have fulfilled their callings. In South Africa for instance, the Anglo-Boer war (or South African War) of 1899-1902 can be counted as another example. It can also be said that apartheid and racial discrimination, which was strongly supported by the church in South Africa, perpetuated violence amongst people.

John de Gruchy, who also took part in the *Costly Obedience* consultation, states that at a time when both church and society were being torn apart by racial conflict and the escalation of violence, it was very difficult to interest church leaders, ministers and church members, especially amongst Black churches, in church unions and issues of faith and order such as ministry, Eucharist, creeds and confessions. De Gruchy further argues that for the ecumenical church witness in South Africa, embodied in the South African Council of Churches (SACC) and the Christian Institute (CI) respectively, in those days witnessing to the truth of the gospel meant conflict, and that confessing Jesus Christ separated sheep from goats; it brought division, not unity.<sup>130</sup> The unity of the church, which was the primary concern of the

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<sup>127</sup> See Mudge, *Ecclesiology and Ethics in Current Ecumenical Debate*: 1996, 18.

<sup>128</sup> See *Costly Obedience*: 1997, 60.

<sup>129</sup> See *Costly Obedience*: 1997, 61.

<sup>130</sup> See J. de Gruchy, 1997. "Church Unity and Democratic Transformation: Perspectives on Ecclesiology and Ethics in South Africa". *Ecumenical Review*, Number 49, 1997, 356-357.

ecumenical movement, was impossible without such a concrete confession in truth.<sup>131</sup> The DRC's involvement in apartheid brought tension amongst churches in South Africa. However, it is evident that its stance on apartheid resulted in the malformation of its members. More to this fact, South Africa is in a slide of moral decay and apartheid is one of the major causes of the present situation. This study wrestles with the question whether church unity can help to challenge the moral decay in society.

*Costly Obedience* wrestles with the fact that churches do not take their responsibility for moral formation seriously enough. Instead of being agents of just social transformation, they too often uncritically conform to unjust social and economic patterns within their cultural and national contexts. The result is moral malformation of the membership of the churches that inevitably has a similar influence on the wider society.<sup>132</sup> According to De Gruchy, the history of the church in South Africa for instance, has been one failed endeavours to express unity and achieve union. De Gruchy notes that matters of doctrine, theology and liturgy were by no means the sole or even main cause of division or the reason for the failure of church unity negotiations. However, as in many places, social, personal, cultural and political forces were far more prevalent.<sup>133</sup> All of these social realities prevented church unity and had serious implications on the witness of the church in the shaping of South Africa as a country, as well as in the moral formation of both church members and citizens of the country.<sup>134</sup> It is evident that the apartheid system contributed greatly to the malformation of Christians and the citizens of the South African society.

*Costly Obedience* notes that there are many forces currently operative around the world that carries the seeds of violence and that these forces or demons need to be recognised now and named by the churches within their local contexts, as South Africa recognised their moral failure in the past and confessed theological justification apartheid as heresy.<sup>135</sup> De Gruchy correctly argues that the struggle against apartheid was essentially a moral struggle, yet one which was also profoundly theological, as the declaration that apartheid is a heresy showed.<sup>136</sup> The reality is that South Africa is on the verges of moral decay and the churches are not vocal

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<sup>131</sup> See De Gruchy, *Church Unity and Democratic Transformation*: 1997, 357.

<sup>132</sup> See *Costly Obedience*: 1997, 62.

<sup>133</sup> See De Gruchy, *Church Unity and Democratic Transformation*: 1997, 358.

<sup>134</sup> See De Gruchy, *Church Unity and Democratic Transformation*: 1997, 358.

<sup>135</sup> See *Costly Obedience*: 1997, 63.

<sup>136</sup> See De Gruchy, *Church Unity and Democratic Transformation*: 1997, 361.

enough in addressing this predicament in society. It is clear that some more work must be done by the churches with regards to moral formation.

*Costly Obedience* also takes cognisance of the role played by the Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC) in 1996 and the role of the churches and other faith communities in the social transformation of South Africa. It can be argued that South Africa still wrestles with reconciliation and justice after the TRC and some more work must be done with regard to this situation. Russel Botman observes that the process of storytelling during the TRC was an eye opener and hope for the future of South African society. Botman, in his article titled *Narrative Challenges in a Situation of Transition*, states that every day when the victims speak on public television the codes of the “metaphorical locking devices” are broken. Children from local churches and homes where these “metaphorical locking devices” were applied are exposed to the national process of storytelling. For Botman, this time, it is the stories of the victims that they hear.<sup>137</sup>

According to Botman, every night when these children go home, they know the code of the “metaphorical locking device”, and the contemporary miracle happens; their mute parents begin to speak.<sup>138</sup> One could argue that these metaphorical locking devices Botman is referring to are the malformations in which every time when the victims speaks, the truth that comes out unlocks the codes. According to *Costly Obedience*, the telling of these stories is in itself therapeutic and morally formative and empowering, yet also backed up by a reparation programme where this is appropriate and possible. One can ask the question whether the people in South Africa will be able to carry the load of the truth that comes from storytelling processes. Or might it cause more damage and escalates more violence between racial groups in society? However, churches need to recommit themselves to unity that will help the South African society to regain morality.

#### 4.4.3. Eucharist and baptism for formation

Two significant sacraments that are also sacraments of the Reformed tradition were chosen by *Costly Obedience* as tools for moral formation, and these are the Eucharist and baptism. It

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<sup>137</sup> See H.R. Botman, 1996. “Narrative Challenges in a Situation of Transition”, in: *To remember and to heal: Theological and Psychological Reflections on Truth and Reconciliation*, in H. Russel Botman and Robin M Petersen (eds.) 1996, 39.

<sup>138</sup> See Botman, *Narrative Challenges in a Situation of Transition*, 1996, 39.

became evident that Eucharistic liturgy can or rather does play a vital role in Christian moral formation. In worship lies the heart of Christian moral formation, through which Christ's story of salvation is re-enacted in prayer, proclamation and sacrament as ritual actions show the way. *Costly Obedience* states that they are "rites which embody what is right."<sup>139</sup> According to *Costly Obedience*, in Eucharistic worship the experience story of discipleship is taken up into the very life of the Trinity. Our participation in the story of Christ gives us new eyes to see the world and new energy to bear witness in it and liturgy is thus not something added to the moral and political endeavour, but its nourishing ground.<sup>140</sup> Duncan Forrester alludes to this fact when he writes: "The Eucharist may be understood as nourishment for moral growth and formation. Like all worship, he says, this central liturgy has an important function of edifying, of building up the community and its members."<sup>141</sup>

The formative role of the Eucharist, both in relation to the community and the individual, is based on the fact that the Lord's Table was an open invitation to overcome deeply entrenched suspicions, divisions and hostilities, and all came together to experience a new and challenging depth of community, for the Eucharist involves a commitment to sharing with the needy neighbour.<sup>142</sup>

The Lima text Baptism, Eucharist and Ministry (BEM) study clarifies the moral dimension of the Eucharist in the following way:

It is a representative act of thanksgiving and offering on behalf of the whole world, and it is a constant challenge in the search for appropriate relationship in social, economic and political life (Matt. 5:23; 1 Cor. 10:16; 1 Cor. 11:20-22; Gal. 3:28). In Eucharist all kinds of injustice, racism, separation and lack of freedom are radically challenged when we share the body and blood of Christ and that we are placed under continual judgement as Christians by the persistence of unjust relationships of all kinds in our society.<sup>143</sup>

In *Costly Obedience*, the liturgy is understood as the principal dialogic encounter where God and human beings meet and where the church as the body is knit together as a single cloth of

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<sup>139</sup> See *Costly Obedience*: 1997, 67.

<sup>140</sup> See *Costly Obedience*: 1997, 67.

<sup>141</sup> See Forrester, *The True Church and Morality*: 1997, 54.

<sup>142</sup> See Forrester, *The True Church and Morality*: 1997, 54-55.

<sup>143</sup> See *Costly Obedience*: 1997, 68.



narrative, teaching, repentance and forgiveness, confession and proclamation, prophecy and doxology. The character of the church as moral community is grounded in liturgy, but it does not exhaust the liturgy's whole meaning, *Costly Obedience* argues.<sup>144</sup>

With regard to baptism, *Costly Obedience* notes that there are clear formational responsibilities in the act of baptism indicated for the whole faith community. Part of these responsibilities is the fact that parents promise to bring up their child in the nurture and admonition of the Lord, the entire congregation pledges itself to provide an exemplary environment of witness and service. Those baptised are led into a life of moral witnessing.<sup>145</sup> In this regard, Forrester describes baptism as a celebration of grace; recognition of God's choice and also a recentring of life, a reorientation, a new beginning. In his opinion, baptism is entry into a community of forgiven sinners, a fellowship of reconciliation, not company moral heroes.<sup>146</sup> Our ecumenical reality is more evident and clear in our common baptism as we either enter upon or celebrate the same basic formation in Jesus Christ's life, death and resurrection irrespective of our different Eucharistic and theological expressions of the baptism. Forrester states that in baptism we embark upon the life and discipline of discipleship, and are called to be people of character, showing love, generosity and graciousness in our dealings and struggling against the selfishness, pride, violence and arrogance which are endemic in a sinful world.<sup>147</sup> It is evident that baptism has significant ethical implications that need to be fulfilled by those entering into it.

*Costly Obedience* clearly points out that baptism is a local event with ecumenical implications, as it is the rite of entry into membership in the local congregation and into membership of the universal church. Again, this clearly indicates that our common acceptance of baptism shows us that the task of formation in Jesus is inherently one and is shared by the entire church. As *Costly Obedience* puts it: "We thereby enter into union with Christ, with each other, and with the church of every time and place."<sup>148</sup> The cornerstone of our baptism has to do with the lived reality of the new life in Christ, a community in which the gifts of faith, hope and love are received and practised. Hence, unity in baptism can have a visible moral form. The common baptism we share according to *Costly Obedience* should make our

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<sup>144</sup> See *Costly Obedience*: 1997, 68.

<sup>145</sup> See *Costly Obedience*: 1997, 70.

<sup>146</sup> See Forrester, *The True Church and Morality*: 1997, 51.

<sup>147</sup> See Forrester, *The True Church and Morality*: 1997, 52.

<sup>148</sup> See *Costly Obedience*: 1997, 70 -71.



members aware that the formation they receive leads to a common responsibility, across all lines of ecclesiastical or ethnic difference, for being a people in the world that can make a difference.<sup>149</sup> *Costly Obedience* notes that churches have not been able to find any significantly visible expression of this oneness amongst the baptised and argues that a moral community of the baptised, struggling with justice issues in the life of the world, could be the most visible and tangible lived expression of the unity that is given to us in Jesus Christ.<sup>150</sup> This implies that baptism has implications and a mandate to execute moral witnessing in and outside the church. This is our common responsibility and a call to make new disciples. Martien Brinkman summarises the ethical implications of both baptism and Eucharist when he writes:

This emphasis on the ethical implications of the baptism and the Lord's Supper implies that nobody can participate in the Lord's Supper without dedicating himself to the cause of reconciliation, justice and peace and that nobody can be baptized unto forgiveness of sins without learning to render account of the need for new life in Christ.<sup>151</sup>

#### 4.4.4. Our communion in moral witnessing

*Costly Obedience* endorsed that the task of the two great ecumenical enterprises, namely *Faith and Order* and *Life and Works* need to be understood, appreciated and carried forward in an inter-related and shared vision.<sup>152</sup> *Costly Obedience* warns us not to confuse what an ecumenical enterprise stands for – its fundamental vision, with the particular institutional form and vocabulary used. The vocabularies always reflect specific institutional histories, they carry codes that insiders recognise, and the point is to find new vocabularies, which can take these visions up into a new synthesis, says *Costly Obedience*.<sup>153</sup> The most significant aspect that needs to be done today in the notion of formation in the faith, is a discipleship worked out in a formation simultaneously liturgical and moral. By this move, *Costly Obedience* argues that we need to find our way again through recovery of the very substance of the faith as confessed and lived. This means a return to the sources, a deep revisiting and

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<sup>149</sup> See *Costly Obedience*: 1997, 71.

<sup>150</sup> See *Costly Obedience*: 1997, 71.

<sup>151</sup> See Martien Brinkman, 1999. *Sacraments of Freedom: Ecumenical Essays on Creation and Sacrament – Justification and Freedom*, Meinema Zoetermeer, The Netherlands, 1999, 95.

<sup>152</sup> See *Costly Obedience*: 1997, 72.

<sup>153</sup> See *Costly Obedience*: 1997, 72.

renewal of our connection to the story of salvation through its repetition in worship.<sup>154</sup> This kind of formation likewise shapes the community of faith itself to take a moral role in relation to events around it.

It must be noted that the faith life focuses on the immediate necessities of our local context. *Costly Obedience* argues that our reading of the signs of the times needs first to open our eyes to immediate opportunities for moral witness that can be grasped even when we cannot see very far or explore the larger ramifications of our actions.<sup>155</sup> I find this very important for the relevance of the church in social contexts, especially for its witness and service in the world. *Costly Obedience* notes that not all moral challenges we face involves risky boundary situations. However, too much reflection on general principles may even be a way of avoiding what we know full well is our immediate calling. It is reasonably clear what we ought to do; we are to do justice, to love mercy and to walk humbly with our God (Micah 6:8), says *Costly Obedience*.<sup>156</sup> Our actions are in many cases the result of formation that simply makes the move intuitive where we think in terms of the values built into the kind of community we belong to.

However, in dealing with the questions of the reconstruction of the *oikoumene*, *Costly Obedience* uses the resonance and recognition metaphors as the key to answer these questions. *Costly Obedience* argues that the key insight is that the Holy Spirit generates a kind of energy-field characterised by the recognisable “resonance” of Christ’s presence in the world.<sup>157</sup> Very interestingly, the resonance and recognition enabled *Costly Obedience* to turn to a biblical formula found in the Johannine literature (John 10:3; Rev. 3:20) where the sheep knows the shepherd’s voice. *Costly Obedience* takes cognisance of the fact that the communion we have with one another today is “real but imperfect”. This is the weakness of our *oikoumene* as Christians in both levels, locally and globally. This alone is a threat and weakness to our Christian moral witnessing in the world. This can be seen in the case of South Africa. The communion that the churches used to have during apartheid under the umbrella body of the South African Council of Churches (SACC) is no longer effective enough, or so it seems. This makes it very difficult for the church in South Africa to have a clear vision and witness to the challenges of the day. There is a need for the reconstruction of

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<sup>154</sup> See *Costly Obedience*: 1997, 74.

<sup>155</sup> See *Costly Obedience*: 1997, 74.

<sup>156</sup> See *Costly Obedience*: 74.

<sup>157</sup> See *Costly Obedience*: 1997, 78.

this *oikoumene* in South Africa. Urgent attention needs to be given to the renewal in our churches of the work of moral formation in obedient discipleship and of the kinds of costly ethical witnessing in the world that depend upon it.

#### 4.5. Conclusion

It can be concluded that these three important consultations of the WCC namely, *Costly Unity*, *Costly Commitment* and *Costly Obedience*, had significant outcomes in bringing ecclesiology and ethics together. Further to this, notions such as *koinonia* also played a significant role in this regard, in an attempt to explore this interrelation between the nature of the church and its calling. The first consultation at Rønde, *Costly Unity* emphasised that there is no way that the Faith and Order and Life and Work commissions express the visible unity of the church in a fruitful way unless they have a mutual conversation of enrichment with each other. Here, the emphasis was that ecclesiology and ethics belong together. The church cannot speak of unity if such unity is not visible enough for the world to see. In this regard, *Costly Unity* concluded that all the ways in which the church is understood validates its nature and vocation as a moral community. Hence, *Costly Unity* declared that moral issues and struggles often mark the gap between cheap and costly unity because cheap unity avoids morally contested issues as they would disturb church unity.

*Costly Unity* also declared that the unity we have is a gift and has been won for us by Christ on the cross, therefore it is costly. For this unity to be real, Christians are called to exemplify the unity and harmony, reconciliation and justice that Christ won for us. This means that our unity must have ethical implications. Therefore, this interrelation between ecclesiology and ethics is so significant. There is an interconnection in the search for the visible unity of the church and the quest for justice, peace and caring for creation. The church as a moral community, in its visible unity and witnessing, must strive to renew the broken relationships between church members and work towards establishing renewed relations, justice, peace and reconciliation in the world. *Costly Unity* also declared the church as a social ethic.

*Costly Commitment* took the idea of the church as moral community further to state that in the church as *koinonia* a constant of moral formation takes place and this was followed up in future discussions on moral formation and the church. Again, *Costly Commitment* emphasised the calling and the vocation of the church and the notions of moral formation and discernment

within the life of the churches in relation both to their search for visible unity and to their witness in the world. Churches were urged to commit themselves to one another in this ecumenical journey. The discussion at Tantar brought ecclesiology and ethics together by affirming that there can be no ecclesiology in the living Christian community without ethics and no ethics without ecclesiology. *Costly Commitment* emphasised the significance of the church's commitment to issues of justice, peace and integrity of creation. As disciples, we are called to a constant process of discernment how best to participate in the moral struggles, complexities and challenges facing humanity today, being guided by our faith convictions in the process. The church is faced by many challenges today with regards to moral formation and discernment. *Costly Commitment* outlined some of these challenges and yet, if we look at local churches, there is still a lot to be done with regard to these. It can be said that some of the churches have lost the moral fibre and also neglected their role of moral formation.

Even for the South African context, it is often said that the voice of the church is very silent, if not absent with regard to some of the moral challenges that we are facing today. In this regard I can highlight that only in December 2012 the church raised its concerns regarding moral challenges in the South African society through the church leaders' document titled: *The church speaks...for such as time as this...*<sup>158</sup> I will comment in more detail in the concluding chapter regarding this document. The church gave a clear vision and guidance during the struggle against apartheid, but today that ecumenical voice is very rare in the South African context that is faced by divisions even in its new democracy. This discussion of moral formation was also explored further in Johannesburg at the *Costly Obedience* consultation where the church's role on moral formation was re-emphasised.

It can be concluded that these consultations successfully brought these two concerns of the Faith and Order and Life and Work commissions of the World Council of Churches together. They narrowed the gap that existed between these commissions. However, they highlighted that the being of the church cannot be separated from its vocation to the world. These three consultations played a remarkable role in bringing ecclesiology and ethics together. With this in mind, the next chapters will focus on the ecclesiology and ethics as it played out in the discourse surrounding a contested church document, namely the Belhar Confession of the Uniting Reformed Church in Southern Africa (URCSA). The Belhar Confession debate, like

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<sup>158</sup> See <http://www.sacc.org.za/Dec2012/The church speaks.pdf> [Accessed 28 November 2012].

the Ecclesiology and Ethics debate of the WCC, addresses the significant link between what the church is and what the church does. On the one hand, the Ecclesiology and Ethics debate under *Costly Unity*, *Costly Commitment* and *Costly Obedience*, argues strongly that these three “costlies” cannot be disconnected from each other, whilst the Belhar Confession debate contends that *Costly Unity* requires *Costly Reconciliation* and *Costly Justice*, and these cannot be disconnected when we speak of the unity of the church and its witness to society.

## **Part II: The Belhar Confession Debate**

### **Chapter 5**

#### **The unity of the church and the reality of division in South Africa**

In the following chapters the focus will shift from the Ecclesiology and Ethics debate of the WCC to the Belhar Confession debate in the South African context. In chapter five I will discuss as background the ecclesiological injustices that paved a way for the reality of divisions in South Africa that influence the birth of the Belhar Confession. In chapter six I will briefly examine the road to the formulation of the Belhar Confession with specific focus on the declaration of a *status confessionis*, the purpose of the confession and its structure. In chapter seven I will discuss the theological meaning of the three articles (or contents) of the Belhar Confession under these themes, *Costly Unity*, *Costly Reconciliation* and *Costly Justice*. Lastly, in chapter eight I will make some concluding remarks on the significance of church unity in social contexts. The goal throughout this section is to indicate the close relationship between Ecclesiology and Ethics in the Belhar Confession trajectory.

#### **5.1. Introduction**

Since the arrival of the Reformed faith with the Dutch colonists in 1652, the early practice in the first decades was joint worship for White and “Coloured” people, although the Coloured people often had reserved seats in the church. In time, however, the inclusion of other non-white Christians in the church services of the Dutch Reformed Church (DRC) raised a lot of concerns and uneasiness for many White people. This chapter attempts to look at some crucial events in the history of Christianity in South Africa where possible church unity was rejected in order to fuel white superiority, racial discrimination, inequality and social division within society.

However, the aim of this chapter is not to look at all these fundamental historical events that maintained division amongst Christians. This chapter will look mainly at certain events in the history of the church, especially in the DRC, that perpetuated and emphasised the inequalities amongst Christians, and dominance of a certain racial group over the others. Just as in the case of the ecclesiology and ethics debate of the World Council of Churches (WCC), the

question of inequality, racism and injustices illuminated the ecclesiology and ethics debate within the South African context. There is some congruity between the WCC debate and the debate on ecclesiology and ethics within the South African context, as they both focus on the role of the church with regard to ethics.

In this chapter the focus will be on how divisions and racial prejudice came into being since the birth of Christianity in South Africa in 1652. Amongst other things, one can mention the forceful removal of Khoikhoi and many other Black people from their own land by the White settlers. This chapter also relates how the sacraments of baptism and Holy Communion were used as tools for maintaining inequalities, divisions and injustices amongst Christians, which also led to deliberate racial discrimination and the strategized apartheid policy. This chapter also attends briefly to two important synods of the DRC decisions, namely, the 1829 Synod, where it was decided that the Holy Communion should be served to all members of the church simultaneously and keep the worship together as a symbol of church unity, and also the Synod of 1857, which clearly decided on the separation of worship (including Holy Communion) services along racial lines. The decision of this 1857 synod eventually opened the door to the splitting of worship services for White and Coloured Christians. It can further be argued that the 1857 synod decision had serious implications for the division within the household of the Dutch Reformed family of churches. The DR family of churches services were divided along racial lines.

This chapter will unfold by looking at the establishment of separate Dutch Reformed churches for Coloured, Black and Indian people and the rise of apartheid policy in South Africa, which was legitimised by the DRC. It must be noted that racial segregation comes a long way and can be traced back to the birth of Christianity in South Africa. The recent and current church unity discussion does not occur in an historical vacuum; it comes from within a specific historical context marked by division, oppression, and inequality amongst believers. This chapter will draw on the work of scholars such as Adonis, Elphick, Loff, and Giliomee.<sup>1</sup> The

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<sup>1</sup> See J.C. Adonis, 1982. *Die afgebreekte skeidsmuur weer opgebou: Die verstrengeling van die sendingbeleid van die Nederduitse Gereformeerde Kerk in Suid – Afrika met die praktyk en ideologie van die apartheid in historiese perspektief*, Editions Rodopi B.V, Amsterdam 1982. Netherlands. See Richard Elphick, 2012. *The equality of believers: Protestant Missionaries and the racial politics of South Africa*, University of KwaZulu-Natal Press. See Chris Loff, 1981. *Dogter of Verstoteling?* Cape Town. See Chris Loff, 1983. The history of a heresy. In: *Apartheid is a heresy*: in John W. De Gruchy & Charles Villa-Vicencio (eds.), David Philip, Cape Town. See Hermann Giliomee, 2003:2.83, 'The Weakness of Some': The Dutch Reformed Church and White Supremacy, in *Scriptura International Journal of Bible, Religion and Theology in Southern Africa*.

goal is to provide background information in order to assess more fully the debate around the Belhar confession, and its emphasis on unity, reconciliation and justice.

## 5.2. The year 1652 - Christianity and the colonization of South Africa

The South African church historian Johannes Adonis observes that the birth of Christianity in South Africa during the arrival of Jan van Riebeeck in the Cape in 1652 will always mark the beginning of the period of colonisation of South Africa. For Adonis the beginning of the Christian Religion in South Africa earmarked the very beginning of the time of colonialism. Adonis also regards the planting as the carrying over of Christian faith to the South point of South Africa as a new product of colonialism politics of the United East Indian Company, better known as Vereenigde Oost Indische Compagnie (VOC).<sup>2</sup> Another church historian, Richard Elphick, in line with Adonis, further notes that the Dutch Reformed Church (DRC), the spiritual home of most Dutch-speaking settlers, pioneered the practice of segregated churches, and, in the twentieth century, decisively shaped apartheid theory. Elphick further states that there was a severe tension between two of DRC fervently held commitments, that is, to evangelize people of colour and to preserve white supremacy.<sup>3</sup>

The VOC had a motive for its establishment in the Cape, which Adonis describes briefly as strictly for commercial purposes. They wanted to gain a valuable trade in which all its competitors would be excluded in its monopoly, Adonis says.<sup>4</sup> From this perspective, it can be argued that the VOC was having a double agenda in its purpose. This becomes clear when Adonis calls attention to the fact that commander Jan van Riebeeck's responsibility given by the VOC was to keep good and friendly relations with the Khoikhoi<sup>5</sup>, who were the providers of necessary fresh meat for those who were passing by the ships of the VOC. Jonathan Gerstner, in line with Adonis, also points out that in 1652, the VOC set up a half-way station at the Cape for its ships and that this outpost was intended at first, simply to provide a port of call for Dutch ships to pick up fresh supplies. Gerstner argues that as early as 1657, the

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<sup>2</sup> See Adonis, *Die afgebreekte skeidsmuur weer opgebou*: 1982, 28-29.

<sup>3</sup> See Richard Elphick, 2012. *The equality of believers: Protestant Missionaries and the racial politics of South Africa*, University of KwaZulu-Natal Press, 2012, 39.

<sup>4</sup> See Adonis, *Die afgebreekte skeidsmuur weer opgebou*: 1982, 2.

<sup>5</sup> They were later called 'Coloureds' during the apartheid regime. According to Adonis, it was only in the 19<sup>th</sup> century that the term 'Coloured' was used. According to him, Troup, he quotes, "Was under the impression that, the Cape Coloureds are derived from a basic mixture of Khoikhoi, San and Malay slave, with a strong infusion of the blood of the black African and of the White master" See Adonis, *Die afgebreekte skeidsmuur weer opgebou*: 1982, 9.



Company allowed some of its former employees to settle and farm and in subsequent decades, immigration added to their ranks.<sup>6</sup> It can be argued that as a result of the influx of immigrants coming to the shores of Cape Town to work for the VOC and also to farm, some tensions between the indigenous people and the White people started to develop.

Gerstner states that the Dutch Reformed Church as the established church exercised a virtual monopoly of Christian expression in the new colony. He further indicates that the Reformed church's life and theology played a formative role in the development of South African culture, as it particularly contributed greatly to the formation of a distinctive identity amongst the White settlers and to their conviction of their superiority to the indigenous peoples and slaves.<sup>7</sup> It must be noted that this Reformed church life and theology as understood by White people played a major role in maintaining inequality between White people and other racial groups. The inequalities between the Khoisan people and the White people resulted not just in a loss of materialistic things, but also to a loss of the Khoisan people's identity. According to Elphick, after decades of work on White-owned farms, Khoisan people were no longer an independent people in language, dress, and social attitudes. Their traditional political structures had long ago collapsed.<sup>8</sup> It becomes evident that the roots of inequalities between the White people and the Khoisan people were very deep and caused a lot of pain and tensions between these racial groups.

Amongst other questionable practices in the history of church planting and Christianising Khoikhoi people, was the seizure of their land. The Khoikhoi land was taken away from them by the Dutch settlers. Gerstner states that settlers received land grants for farms close to the Cape fort, and with rapid demographic growth, the colony expanded, the settlers subjugating the indigenous Khoisan and seizing their land and livestock.<sup>9</sup> The unjust seizing of land by the settlers resulted in slavery. The late South African Reformed church historian Chris Loff asserts that during the course of the years the free Burgers and later the Trek Boers measured more land, which they took for themselves. This resulted in less grazing field and the

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<sup>6</sup> See J. Gerstner, 1997. A Christian monopoly: The Reformed Church and Colonial Society under Dutch Rule. In: Richard Elphick and Rodney Davenport (eds.) *Christianity in South Africa: A Political, Social, and Cultural History*, David Philip, 1997, 16.

<sup>7</sup> See Gerstner, A Christian monopoly: 1997, 16.

<sup>8</sup> See Elphick, *The equality of believers*: 2012, 28.

<sup>9</sup> See Gerstner, A Christian monopoly: 1997, 16.

Khoikhoi in certain instances were forced to move deeper into the land, otherwise they would lose their livestock.<sup>10</sup>

In line with Loff on the matter of land acquisition, Adonis argues that the Khoikhoi complained about the way they were removed from their land. They publicly claimed that the land belonged to them from all ages, that they have a right to it and that they would never allow Hollanders to acquire it. The forceful removal of Khoisan people from their own land was unjust and propelled violence and resentment between them and the White settlers.

However, in 1661, the VOC suggested that in future they must buy the land from the Khoikhoi people and in 1672 a huge portion of land was bought from the Khoikhoi. Following this development, the position of the Khoikhoi people became worse, says Adonis.<sup>11</sup>

The Khoikhoi realised that more livestock for Hollanders means very little land for them. Clearly, they were alienated from their ownership of land and livestock. Being alienated from the land contributed negatively to the Khoikhoi people's social life as they continued to suffer under this slavery. The hardship that many Black people suffered in South Africa started with the forced removal from their own land. This was a strategy used by the free Burgers and Trek Boers to occupy or colonise more land. Land was mostly important for the Khoikhoi's living. In fact, it can be said that land means life and in an unjust way, this source of life was seized from the Khoikhoi and many people in South Africa. The forced removal from the land means that the land was taken by force and with violence. Today in South Africa, the land restitution and land redistribution issue is an issue of justice, perhaps not only justice, but also a call for reconciliation.

The South African Black Reformed ethicist Welile Mazamisa is correct when he states that the land problem in South Africa is not only a political, economic and emotional reality, it is also an ethical issue of significance.<sup>12</sup> Mazamisa strongly argues that there can be no political,

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<sup>10</sup> See Loff, *Dogter of Verstoreling?* 1981, 15.

The land question was the big issue during the colonial time. The Khoikhoi were not satisfied with the way they were handled by the Trek Boers or the way in which they were alienated from their own land. This resulted in a tense relationship between the Boers and the Khoikhoi.

<sup>11</sup> See J.C. Adonis, 1982. *Die afgebreekte skeidsmuur weer opgebou*: 1982, 7-8.

<sup>12</sup> See Welile Mazamisa, 1994. Reparation and Land: In: Charles Villa-Vicencio and John De Gruchy (eds.) *Doing Ethics in Context: South African Perspectives. Theology and Praxis volume II*, David Philip, 1994, 210.

Mazamisa articulates the importance of land by using Walter Brueggemann's words, saying: "The sense of being lost, displaced, and homeless is pervasive in contemporary culture. Brueggemann goes on to say the

economic and racial solution in South Africa if the land problem is not tackled. For Mazamisa, land is particularly important for those who have lost it through colonialism and resettlement programmes. He emphatically states that we cannot allow the current land distribution between Black and White people to remain unchallenged.<sup>13</sup> In the South African context the land reform is still highly contested and it creates tensions between Black people and White farm owners. As a result of these removals, many Black people became economically weak and poor, and this forced most Black people to become slaves of the White farmers. I also want to argue that we cannot speak of church unity and social contexts, especially for the South African situation, without dealing with the question of justice pertaining to land restitution and land distribution. It is evident that the question of land and land reform is not just an issue of livelihood, but it is also an issue of economic justice. Hence, in many areas in South Africa, mainly in Black settlements, people suffer from poverty and poor living conditions. For many South Africans, the government, and given its close relationship with the government also the DRC, are to be blamed for all types of injustices against Black people in this country ever since the time of Jan van Riebeeck and throughout history.

Now a question can be asked as to whether the unity of the DR family of churches can play a significant role in the South African contexts that suffered these injustices. With regard to the land that was taken forcefully from many Black people by the White people who belonged to the DRC, what will be the cost of the unity of this family of churches? Can unity work amongst Black and White members of this family of churches without correcting these injustices, especially with regard to land issue as an economic issue in the face poverty amongst Black people? Can the unity of the churches in South Africa make any difference with regard to societal renewal and moral formation after this gloomy picture created by the apartheid system? It becomes evident that there is a need for collaborative efforts in healing these divisions. Even though the unity of DR family of churches is an interesting point of focus, the question of justice regarding land reform and land restitution will still remain the biggest challenge and a threat to this unity.

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yearning to belong somewhere; to have a home; to be in a safe place is a deep and moving pursuit. Loss of place and yearning for place are dominant images.” See Mazamisa, *Reparation and Land*: 1994, 210. Mazamisa further explains that this yearning and despair, which I believe also is the same yearning of the Khoisan people is subtly expressed in the pathos of freedom songs like ‘*Sikhalela umhlaba wethu owathathwa ngabelungu*’ (We cry for our land that was taken by the white people). The dominant image among Black people is one of rootlessness, Mazamisa, *Reparation and Land*: 1994, 210.

<sup>13</sup> See Mazamisa, *Reparation and Land*: 1994, 210.

The South African historian Hermann Giliomee points out that although the British government was not a social revolutionary, it was firmer than the VOC with regard to the land issue. The Khoikhoi had recourse to the courts and the right to own land. However, Giliomee asserts that these rights were not effective, given that most of the Khoikhoi people were not Christians and as such, could not swear an oath. For this reason, Giliomee argues, almost no Khoikhoi owned land, for without an oath, their evidence of land ownership counted very little and soon all the richer people were White and almost all the very poor people were Black or Coloured.<sup>14</sup> Mazamisa notes that large tracts of land were reserved historically for White ownership. There was only less than one percent of land owned by Black people in South Africa and in his opinion this has resulted in far-reaching implications for the political economy and human relations in South Africa.<sup>15</sup> As Mazamisa puts it:

The exclusion of blacks from land ownership has been undergirded by the Afrikaner land theology which has preached racial hegemony over land. Afrikaner land theology does not question the legitimacy of white land ownership, because God himself gave the land to his chosen people.<sup>16</sup>

In line with this perspective of Mazamisa, Elphick refers us to Robert Shell and Jonathan Gerstner's explanation of how the theology and liturgy of the Dutch Reformed Church preserved the boundaries separating White people from slaves, Khoisan, and other subordinates groups. The social structure of the colony also hardened along racial lines.

With regards to the reconciliation and land issue, Ernst Conradie, in his article titled *Reconciliation as One Guiding Vision for South Africa? Conceptual Analysis and Theological Reflection*, notes that the *Kairos* Document (1985) denounced the prioritising of reconciliation as "church theology." Conradie states that it famously maintained that "it would be totally unchristian to plead for reconciliation and peace before the present injustices have been removed". Conradie went on to say that any such plea plays into the hands of the oppressor, by trying to persuade those of us who are oppressed to accept our oppression and to become reconciled to the intolerance crimes that are committed against us. For Conradie, this is not

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<sup>14</sup> See Hermann Giliomee, 2003:2.83, 'The Weakness of Some': The Dutch Reformed Church and White Supremacy, in *Scriptura International Journal of Bible, Religion and Theology in Southern Africa*, 2003, 217.

<sup>15</sup> See Mazamisa, *Reparation and Land*: 1994, 212-213.

<sup>16</sup> See Mazamisa, *Reparation and Land*: 1994, 213.

Christian reconciliation, it is sin.<sup>17</sup> He notes that Black theologians, such as Itumeleng Mosala (1987) and Tinyiko Maluleke (1999), have argued that the primary need is not for reconciliation between Black people and White people in South Africa. Conradie refers to Maluleke, who argued:

Our alienation is not alienation from white people first and foremost. Our alienation is from our land, our cattle, our labour which is objectified in industrial machines and technological instrumentation. Our reconciliation with white people will follow from our reconciliation with our fundamental means of livelihood.<sup>18</sup>

Around 1658, Jan van Riebeeck did not find it easy to use the Khoikhoi to work for him, he therefore pursued for the use of slaves and people were allowed to buy themselves slaves. These slaves were coming from different places in Africa and India. Christoff Pauw, in his work *Anti-apartheid Theology in the Dutch Reformed Family of Churches*, states that the VOC imported slaves from Dutch colonies in the East and as the Khoi became incorporated into colonial society, they lost their self-sufficiency and also started to work as slaves.<sup>19</sup>

However, some of the White Boers wanted the government to compel the Khoikhoi people to work and be potential labourers on their farms. Adonis states that the Khoikhoi people were in future prohibited to leave their houses without a pass from the local fiscal or landdrost. Every time they travelled, they had to make sure that they have their passes with them. However, there were complaints from the Khoikhoi people with regard to the way their White masters treated them. Their complaints regarding their bosses who treated them badly were attended and investigated by Goewerneur Cradock.<sup>20</sup>

As the South African church historian J.W. Hofmeyr states, a Dutch Reformed Church congregation was established in Cape Town in 1665 for the first time. The Protestant tradition had its origin in South Africa with the arrival of the Dutch in 1652.<sup>21</sup> However, Jan van

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<sup>17</sup> See E. Conradie, 2013. Reconciliation as one guiding vision for South Africa? Conceptual Analysis and Theological Reflection: In: *Reconciliation: A guiding vision for South Africa?* Ernst Conradie (ed.), SUN Media, Stellenbosch, 2013, 14.

<sup>18</sup> See Conradie, 2013. *Reconciliation*: 2013, 15.

<sup>19</sup> See C. Pauw, 2007. *Anti-Apartheid Theology in the Dutch Reformed Family of Churches: A Depth-Hermeneutical Analysis*. Vrije Universiteit, Amsterdam, 2007, 63. For further historical background on colonisation, the 1857 Synod decision and the establishment of separate Dutch Reformed Church sister churches, see especially, 2007, 55-97. Pauw further notes that the VOC was bound by law to baptise their slaves and educate them whilst it was not the case with the slaves of the Free Burgers.

<sup>20</sup> See Adonis, *Die afgebreekte skeidsmuur weer opgebou*: 1982, 8.

<sup>21</sup> See J.W. Hofmeyr 1994. Christianity in the period of Dutch Colonisation. In: *A History of Christianity in South Africa*: J.W. Hofmeyr and G.J. Pillay, (eds.), Volume 1. HAUM Tertiary, Pretoria. 1994, 11.

Riebeeck had to set a good example for his subordinates with regard to religious matters and at the same time he took a strong stand concerning services attendance. Only one church service was held each Sunday morning. For Jan van Riebeeck, setting a good example for his people as a religious person conflicted with his moral standard and behaviour over the Khoikhoi people.

Although racism and apartheid were terms not used during this time, it is clear that they were in action already. With regard to the Khoikhoi and church services, Hofmeyr reckons that although a number of Khoikhoi people became economically involved in the establishment of the Cape of Good Hope<sup>22</sup> refreshment station in the Cape, there was at first little interest amongst them in the religion of the White settlers.<sup>23</sup> The first Khoikhoi male was only baptised in 1662 and only three women had been baptised by then. Jonathan Gerstner recalls that the first child recorded as baptised at the Cape was the son of Willem Barentsz Wylant, “the first born Christian who was born in this fortress”. Gerstner also states that there were only four converts to Christianity from the Khoikhoi in the seventeenth century, and all four eventually renounced the Christian life. Most importantly, Gerstner notes that Christian status and European descent became increasingly identified in people’s minds, as did “heathen” status and indigenous or slave descent.<sup>24</sup>

It must be noted that during this period the question of the baptism of slaves’ children was a serious debate. Elphick underscores that the Dutch Reformed sacraments of baptism and Holy Communion provided a social boundary that reinforced the emerging identity of White settlers as “Christians”, and excluded most “heathen” slaves, Khoisan, and free people of colour.<sup>25</sup> Gerstner also affirm this by stating that distinctions were made amongst baptised members, and there were two lists with the “names of Christian children” and “Slave children of the Honourable Company.”<sup>26</sup> It is evident that the sacraments and mixed marriages between Black and White people were strictly prevented, as these would result in the

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<sup>22</sup> Hermann Giliomee points out that ‘The Cape of Good Hope’s administration which was under the control of the Dutch East India Company (DEIC) was mostly based on status distinctions of which that between burghers and Company servants, and burghers and slaves were the most important.’ However, Giliomee also highlights that, within the European context, the higher officials of the Company and rich burghers acquired more power and status, but the further these burghers moved into the inside the less these distinctions within a white society counted. See Giliomee, ‘The Weakness of Some’: 2003, 215.

<sup>23</sup> See Hofmeyr, *Christianity in the period of Dutch Colonisation*. 1994, 11.

<sup>24</sup> See Gerstner, 1997. *A Christian monopoly*: 1997, 24-25.

<sup>25</sup> See Elphick, *The equality of believers*: 2012, 39.

<sup>26</sup> See Gerstner, *A Christian monopoly*: 1997, 25.

reinforcement of social equality. Perhaps it can be said that this situation was the root cause of church division, segregation and apartheid system. Elphick also state that the Graaff-Reinet settlers denounced the missionaries for putting Khoisan and Xhosa people “on an equal footing with the Christians”; that is, with the White people.<sup>27</sup> Both, the sacrament of baptism and of Holy Communion for decades long were used as means of maintaining division without even recognising the socio-ethical implications of these sacraments.

As said, in 1665 the congregation of Cape Town was established. This was followed, in 1686, by the Stellenbosch congregation, the Drakenstein (Paarl) congregation in 1691, the Rhoodezand (Tulbagh) congregation in 1743, and the Swartland (Mariesburg) congregation in 1745.<sup>28</sup> However, attempts were being made by some of the DRC ministers to have slaves baptised as well. Giliomee affirms that these attempts, made by Reverend M.C. Vos and H.R. van Lier, to influence slaveholders to let their slaves be baptised made little progress. As Giliomee puts it:

As a result of the resolution of the Synod of Dort of 1618 – 1619, as well as some ambiguous government proclamations, slaveholders had concluded that they would be forced to free baptised slaves.<sup>29</sup>

Gerstner, in line with Giliomee, states that the Synod of Dort had addressed the question of the baptism of slave children held by Christian owners, concluding that slaves were part of the household of the slaveholder, following the practice of Abraham. Gerstner state that theologians favoured delaying baptism until a slave was converted and eventually all agreed that Christian slaves could not be sold out of the spiritual household in which they were born.<sup>30</sup> In a sense, baptism was the key for unlocking the chains of slavery and bringing about equal social status and this was refused by their White bosses, hence the slaves were not baptised.

Giliomee asserts that the main reason for the gap between master and slave was the way in which the church had to be mindful of the key concern of its members, to prevent

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<sup>27</sup> See Elphick, *The equality of believers*: 2012, 27.

<sup>28</sup> See Hofmeyr, *Christianity in the period of Dutch Colonisation*. 1994, 20.

<sup>29</sup> See Giliomee, ‘The Weakness of Some’: 2003, 216. Giliomee reckons that the slaveholders had a belief that Christianity narrowed the gap between master and slave, and that to have them baptised was detrimental to investment. He argues that, as elsewhere, masters at the Cape followed the market and they were aware of the fact that slaves who were not baptised were more marketable. See Giliomee, ‘The Weakness of Some’: 2003, 216.

<sup>30</sup> See Gerstner, *A Christian monopoly*: 1997, 18.



*gelykstelling*, or social levelling in which he calls “The flip side of white egalitarianism.”<sup>31</sup> Richard Elphick too states that many Dutch speaking White people feared that missions would lead to *gelykstelling*, that is, to equalisation amongst races, a fear descended from eighteenth-century colonists’ belief that civil rights derived from one’s status as a Christian, and from the consequent fear of slaveholders that their slaves, if baptised, would thereupon be free.<sup>32</sup>

Given this fear for *gelykstelling* as discussed by Elphick, it can be said that baptism brings *gelykstelling* as means of social justice. The rule of the Company and that of the British was that the burghers knew that formally all people were equal before the law, irrespective of their colour of skin and class. However, many burghers resented this act, unfortunately they had no choice because they knew that the servants had a right to complain against their master if they are not satisfied with his actions, or the way he treats them. In the congregation of Graaff-Reinet, this prevention of equality became evident. Elphick notes that when Johannes van der Kemp entered the church of Graaff-Reinet on 1 June 1801, he faced a volatile congregation and before him was a mixture of White church members and a greater number of “heathen” of the Hottentot and other nations. Elphick states that the heathen greeted Van der Kemp by singing Psalm 134: “Praise the Lord, all you servants of the Lord who minister by night in the house of the Lord. Lift up your hands in the sanctuary and praise the Lord.”<sup>33</sup> This greeting was not liked by the White Christians at all, especially this Psalm being sung by heathen Hottentots; it angered them. Elphick points out that the white Christian congregation responded with Psalm 74:4-10 saying: “Your foes ... defiled the dwelling place of your Name .... How long will the enemy mock you, O God? Will the foe revile your name forever?”<sup>34</sup>

This caused great tension in the congregation and there were clear indications that the heathens were not welcome in the church where White members worship the Lord. Psalm 74 in response was directed to the heathen Hottentots that they were the enemies of the Lord.

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<sup>31</sup> Giliomee points out clearly that opposition to this social levelling manifested itself in response to any action that violated the social conventions that underpinned the status and class hierarchy. In his words, he argues: “The Company’s status hierarchy, which formally was carried over to the British period, burghers with property enjoyed high status outside the ranks of government, and those without property somewhat less and a white *knecht* and a free black considerably less.” However, even lower down were Khoisan servants, whilst slaves were at the very last level down of the social ladder. He states that they were in fact condemned to a form of social death, a stigma often carried over to their descendants. See Giliomee, ‘The Weakness of Some’: 2003, 216.

<sup>32</sup> See Elphick, *The equality of believers*: 2012, 42-43.

<sup>33</sup> See Elphick, *The equality of believers*: 2012, 26.

<sup>34</sup> See Elphick, *The equality of believers*: 2012, 26.



This caused serious tension and division in the congregation of Graaff-Reinet. Elphick mentions that it was on the 9<sup>th</sup> of July 1801, when a band of colonists arrived to demand that Khoisan people should be barred from the church, and “that the seats should be washed, the pavement broken up, the pulpit covered with black cloth, as a demonstration of mourning.”<sup>35</sup> It must be noted that the situation in this congregation became more violent and that it clearly showed that the Khoisan people and other subordinate groups were not welcome amongst White people. Again, this act did not only affect the church, but it tremendously affected other social structures as well.

From the gloomy picture of the Graaff-Reinet congregation, it became evident why there was the refusal that Khoisan and slaves be baptised. Loff critically argues that it is not really true that all baptised slaves were freed or that freed slaves were baptised. Loff states that in the beginning, the slaves used to be freed after their baptism. He maintains that according to the investigation being made on previous registers, it shows that most of the slaves who were baptised belonged to the Company, and most of the freed slaves were slaves of private people.<sup>36</sup> In support of his argument on the question of freed slaves after baptism, Loff brings to discussion the case of Bentura Visser (after baptism known as Bentura Johannes), the so-called ‘bastaard’ who was baptised on 26 October 1828, just before the 1829 Synod of the DRC. Although Bentura was baptised and confirmed as a member of the congregation, some White members were unhappy with him partaking in Holy Communion services simultaneously with them. Rev. J Spijker stood by Bentura’s side and maintained that he (Bentura) was baptised and confirmed in front of the congregation and therefore there is no reason why he must enjoy Communion separately.<sup>37</sup> In the case of Bentura it became evident that the White congregants had serious problems with him; not necessarily for his baptism, but for sharing Holy Communion together with them.

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<sup>35</sup> See Elphick, *The equality of believers*: 2012, 26.

<sup>36</sup> See Loff, *Dogter of Verstoteling?* 1981, 16.

In his work *Bevryding tot Eenwording*, Loff also point out the fact that the membership register does not display a slave component that corresponds with the baptismal register. See C.J.A. Loff, 1994. *Bevryding tot Eenwording*: 1994, 80.

<sup>37</sup> C. Loff, 1983. The history of a heresy. In: *Apartheid is a heresy*: in John W. De Gruchy & Charles Villa-Vicencio (eds.), David Philip, Cape Town, 1983, 11-15.

### 5.3. The 1829 Synod of the DRC

The tension on racial division and strive for equality became a long struggle in the church amongst Christians. Elphick states that the Dutch Reformed missionaries were faced with a problem of how to integrate their Black converts into long-established White congregations, for whom the church building, its worship, and sacraments were foci of White peoples' community life and their group identity. Elphick also points out that this raised bitter disputes in many Western Cape congregations over whether Black Christians could take Communion with White people or even be allowed into the church.<sup>38</sup> This resulted in a number of Dutch settlers leaving the colony, the so-called Great Trek, partly because of disputes over race in their local congregations.

However, in 1829 some rural Dutch congregations asked for separate facilities and services for Black converts. Elphick, in line with Pauw, states that the 1829 Dutch Reformed synod was engaged in a debate as to whether persons of colour are admitted as members of the church should be served Holy Communion equally with born Christians.<sup>39</sup> The records of the 1829 synod reads that the proposal for simultaneous taking of Holy Communion by the congregants. The proposal reads:

Dat het Avondmaal gelijktijdig aan alle ledematen, zonder onderscheid van kleur of afkomst, worde toegediend. Nadat de Hoog-Eerw. Heer Voorzitter dit voorstel aan de deliberatie der Synode had voorgedragen, en de Leden onderling daaromtrent hunne gedachten hadden gewisseld, hebben de Hoog-Edele Achtbare Heeren Commissarissen Politiek, voor dat het punt ter conclusie werd gebragt, verklaard dat zij dit 6de voorstel der 6de afdeeling oordeelen, te wezen derogatoir aan de waardigheid van den Christelijken godsdienst, volgens welks leer geen onderscheid of aanzien van personen bij het bedienen en ontvangen van het Sacrament des Heiligen Avondmaal mag worden erkend.<sup>40</sup>

<sup>38</sup> See Elphick, *The equality of believers*: 2012, 43.

<sup>39</sup> See Elphick, *The equality of believers*: 2012, 43. See also Pauw, 2007. *Anti-Apartheid Theology in the Dutch Reformed Family of Churches*. 2007, 67-71. Pauw points out that the matter attracted much debate and it was brought to the attention of the 1829 Synod, who discussed the following proposal: "To have the Sacrament of the Lord's Supper dispensed at the same time to all members of the church without distinction." Pauw further states that during the deliberations the official representative of the state at the Synod (known as the commissioner-politics) interrupted and said that it was "derogatory for the dignity of the Christian religion" to discuss such a matter. 2007, 67.

<sup>40</sup> See *Acta Synodi NG Kerk in SA 1824-63*, 71. See also Loff, *Bevryding tot Eenwording*: 1994, 87.

According to Loff this proposal was not debated by the Synod, because the minutes of the Synod do not tell about any debate on this matter. Loff further emphasised that what we do know is that it was ‘advised’ that, accordance with the Bible teaching and the spirit of Christianity, the Church was forced to make no exceptions in this regard, people should take Holy Communion together. Furthermore, the role of the Kommissaris Politiek in this case was clearly that of a civil servant who used his authority to prevent a question that was humiliating for the Church from being discussed. The Kommissaris Politiek believed that it ought to be an accepted and irrefutable principle that there could be no discrimination at Communion.<sup>41</sup>

In line with Loff, Johan Botha also highlights that for the first 200 years of the DRC in the Cape, until the 1840s, the colonial government was involved in an active way with the DRC’s management of affairs. Botha states that the government official present at the Synod meeting in 1829 advised the DRC that the mere discussion of the possible creation of separate occasions and locations for sharing in the Lord’s Supper for church members from various race and population groups, discredited the dignity of the Gospel. The Synod decided that all confirmed members should partake equally and jointly in the Lord’s Supper.<sup>42</sup> The Swedish theologian Lennart Henriksson alludes to this by stating that it was impossible for the split of the Holy Communion service as the British government then still kept an eye on the church and moreover, had the last say on all church decisions. According to Ordinance 50, all free people were considered equal before the law, Henriksson says.<sup>43</sup> Loff notes that neither the Presbytery nor the Synod meetings directly referred to Ordinance 50.<sup>44</sup>

In line with Johan Botha, Christoff Pauw states that some colonists objected to sitting at the Table of the Lord together with Coloured people – referred to as “Hottentotten, Bastaards, Vryswartes en Slaven.” Pauw further states that the matter was brought to the attention of the 1829 Synod, who proposed to have the Sacrament of the Lord’s Supper dispensed at the same time to all members of the church without distinction.<sup>45</sup> This was to be done without the

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<sup>41</sup> See C. Loff, 1983. The history of a heresy. In: *Apartheid is a heresy*: in John W. De Gruchy & Charles Villa-Vicencio (eds.), David Philip, Cape Town, 1983, 15-16.

<sup>42</sup> See J.G. Botha 2002. Accounting for the hope that is in us of embodied unity, true reconciliation and compassionate justice: Our story is part of the bigger story. In Pieter Coertzen (red) *350 Jaar Gereformeerde*: CLF, Bloemfontein, 2002, 52.

<sup>43</sup> See L. Henriksson, 2010. *A Journey with a Status Confessionis: Analysis of an apartheid related conflict between the Dutch Reformed Church in South Africa and the World Alliance of the Reformed Churches, 1982-1998*, Swedish Institute of Missionary Research, Sweden, 2010, 51-52.

<sup>44</sup> See Loff, The history of a heresy, 1983, 17.

<sup>45</sup> See Pauw, *Anti-Apartheid Theology in the Dutch Reformed Family of Churches*: 2007, 67. See also C. Loff, The history of a heresy, 1983, 15-16.

distinction of colour. Richard Elphick highlights that some historians believe that the British colonial government's representatives prompted the synod's unanimous vote against racial segregation at communion.<sup>46</sup> One can state that the 1829 Synod opted more for unity to be sustained and celebrated by sharing the Table of the Lord's Supper together.

The South African theologian Charles Villa-Vicencio also affirms that there was initially a measure of church integration in the major centres of the Western Cape. On the frontier and rural areas even the most limited form of integration was unacceptable. When rural and frontier congregations began to demand separate facilities and services for Black converts, theological tradition initially prevailed and baptism was affirmed as the sole theological qualification for church membership. According to Villa-Vicencio, the social discrimination between slaves and slave owners, frontier farmers and the indigenous population and generally, between Black and White people, gained the upper hand.<sup>47</sup> Even though at this 1829 Synod the DRC formally rejected discrimination on racial lines, it never meant that in practice Coloured people were not discriminated against at church services and at the Table of the Holy Communion.

#### **5.4. The 1857 Synod of the DRC**

The tension of serving Holy Communion to the persons of colour simultaneously with the born Christians intensified over decades. This also opens the door to the split of worship services between the Khoikhoi people and the White congregants. The reality is that the decision of the DRC Synod of 1857 came to an already existing separation of facilities and services for Black converts. Adonis states that already in 1824, the South African Missionary Society<sup>48</sup> had built their own church building for the Black Christians in Stellenbosch and in 1829 P.D Lückhoff of the Rynse Mission worked there. Adonis claims that in a White congregation of Durbanville, the church council in 1839 has decided that the freed slave men

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<sup>46</sup> See Elphick, *The equality of believers*: 2012, 43.

<sup>47</sup> See C. Villa-Vicencio, 1988. *Trapped in Apartheid*: Orbis, Maryknoll, 1988, 26.

<sup>48</sup> The South African Missionary Society and its associates refused to be absorbed by the DRC, in which that would determine sacrificing their autonomy and parting with those members who were Lutherans. See Hermann Giliomee, 2003:2.83. "*The weakness of some*": 2003, 218. Giliomee asserts that the DRC was not hostile to the missionary work, however, it wanted to bring missionary work done by its members under its own control, especially since they dominated the ranks of the *Zuid – Afrikaansche Zending Genootschap* (ZAZG) and its affiliated local bodies. This is the reason why this body ZAZG did not want to be absorbed and being under the control of the DRC supremacy.

must sit on the gallery in the church, whilst the women sit under the gallery. There were reserved places for the non-white people in the church.<sup>49</sup>

It must be noted that Black converts were separated from their families when it comes to church services. Black men and women congregants had to occupy different sitting places, whilst their White counterparts were sitting together with their families during church services. There is no reason given for this sitting arrangement, perhaps it could be that they were not regarded as officially married Christian couples, as the White families were. Although this style of sitting in the church can still be noticed even in the Orthodox tradition, in the case of the DRC it seems to have been done with the purpose of preventing non-white men and women from occupying the same seats in the church. What was thought then by the DRC in the early years with regard to the seating arrangement in the church still exists amongst Black congregations in the 21<sup>st</sup> century.

Adonis mentions that even before the Synod of 1857 some White congregations of the DRC were sitting in the same service as the Black converts. There was a unity of some kind amongst Black and White Christians in some congregations, but it was not really a lived unity. Adonis states that the White congregants refused that the Black congregants should worship in a separate building alone. But to various other White congregations this kind of practice became a problem. In Calvinia for instance, Adonis asserts that the White congregants protested against the Black congregants who were using their church building.<sup>50</sup>

According to Adonis, on the 4<sup>th</sup> of January 1845, a certain number of White congregants confronted the church council of Swellendam with a request to not share the same table of Holy Communion with the Black congregants.<sup>51</sup> However, the church council was disappointed by this request. Many White church members in the DRC rejected the idea of separate church services, especially on racial lines. It is evident that these White church members were holding on to the decision of the 1829 DRC Synod, which explicitly declined the separation of Holy Communion service.

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<sup>49</sup> See Adonis, *Die afgebreekte skeidsmuur weer opgebou*: 1982, 52.

<sup>50</sup> See Adonis, *Die afgebreekte skeidsmuur weer opgebou*: 1982, 52-53.

<sup>51</sup> See Adonis, *Die afgebreekte skeidsmuur weer opgebou*: 1982, 53.

One could understand why the church council of Swellendam was disappointed by the request, because this was a sign of discrimination against Black congregants. However, this simply introduced the roots of racism very strongly. According to Stephen Fowl and Gregory Jones, in their book titled *Reading in Communion: Scripture and Ethics in Christian Life*, the structures of apartheid were already deeply embedded in the practise and characters of the majority of the DRC members. For them, Scripture was invoked after the fact to support was already in place. Fowl and Jones further state that in the earliest days the DRC in principle maintained a doctrine of church unity, but in practice, this church manifested the sorts of class, cultural and educational divisions typical of other churches in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. This became evident in cases where Black people were evangelised and began to enter the DRC. Furthermore, they were eligible in principle to share in the Lord's Supper with their White fellow Christians. However, this clearly angered some White DRC members who argued their Black fellow Christians should have a separate service.<sup>52</sup>

Some questions may be asked in this regard: What does it mean to refuse sharing the Holy Communion with other people from different racial groups? Does it not mean exclusion from the welcoming Table? Does exclusion not reflect the opposite of the meaning of the Lord's Supper? How do we relate and interpret the diversity of Jesus Christ's disciples in our own time and contexts? Does the Table of the Holy Communion not reflect equality, love, reconciliation, communion, peace, brotherhood and sisterhood, as well as unity in Christ, as we share on the same bread and wine equally? Is the table of Holy Communion not a place for healing and sharing the pain, love and joy together for what the Lord has done for us by breaking the dividing walls of separation and levelled the ground for common good and justice? Fowl and Jones states that there were several courageous pastors who recognised the sin of excluding fellow Christians from the Lord's Table on the basis of race.<sup>53</sup> It can be said that the request by the congregants was a protest against the unity of the church and the quest for reconciliation and justice.

Henriksson notes that after the 1829 Synod of the DRC, in which the British government had a final say on church decisions, an important prerequisite came about in 1843, when the government lifted its heavy overcoat from the shoulders of the church and it became free to

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<sup>52</sup> See S.E. Fowl and L.G. Jones, 1991. *Reading in Communion: Scripture and Ethics in Christian Life*. William B. Eerdmans, Michigan, 1991, 96.

<sup>53</sup> See Fowl and Jones, *Reading in Communion*: 1991, 96-97.

take its own decisions.<sup>54</sup> However, by 1847, the case was not yet resolved and some of the White congregants emphasised that the Black congregants must worship in a separate building of their own. The separate worship became a serious case to various White congregations. The feeling of the White DRC congregants was that they couldn't share the Holy Communion at the same table with the Black congregants. Fowl and Jones also affirm this tension between Black and White congregants with regard to separate Communion and worship buildings. They state that by the middle of the nineteenth century, the lobby in favour of separation within the church had grown. The idea of one church with separate services or even separate congregations for 'members from the heathen', as new Black converts were called, became very popular.<sup>55</sup>

Nicolaas Hofmeyr rejected the policy of *afscheiding*, later known as separation. In his series of articles pertaining to separate church buildings and services, Hofmeyr argues that in the first place, separation tended to destroy the bond between White and Coloured people. Moreover, this practice destroys the influence of the church in society. Secondly, Hofmeyr rejected as unsuitable the "fusion" of White and Coloured Christians by identical treatment, stating that the Coloured people had a lower level of development; however, the gospel must be brought to them in a simplistic way. Thirdly, Hofmeyr opted for the "middle way" as a means of overcoming the barriers to missionary work and the fear of *gelykstelling*.<sup>56</sup> Giliomee claims that the 1857 Synod decision introduced Hofmeyr's "middle way" to resolve the problem of the White Christians with the Black congregants.<sup>57</sup> I must highlight that Hofmeyr's first point on separation between Black and White people and its impact on church's influence in society remains the challenge of church unity even today locally and globally. This dissertation seeks to emphasise this perspective that church unity can play a significant role in building, renewing and even healing society, especially after the collapse of apartheid that destroyed the meaning of relationships and the quality of human life and the rest of creation. There is no clear evidence whether the middle way of Hofmeyr solved the core of the problem, because inequalities and injustices and created further disunity and tension between Black and White Christians.

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<sup>54</sup> See Henriksson, *A Journey with a Status Confessionis*: 2010, 53.

<sup>55</sup> See Fowl and Jones, *Reading in Communion*: 1991, 97.

<sup>56</sup> See N.J. Hofmeyr, 1853. "Iets over het Zendingwerk." Series of articles in: *De Gereformeerde Kerkbode in Zuid Afrika*, 5 March (65-73), 28 May (163-170), and 25 June (193-200).

<sup>57</sup> See Giliomee, 'The Weakness of Some': 2003, 219-220.



Rodney Davenport is correct when he states that the NGK (DRC) 1857 Synod's decision to legitimise the custom of separate churches for the races "on account of the weakness of some" had more decisive impact than it would have had in other denominations. Pertaining to this decision, Davenport further notes that the 1857 DRC Synod decision was not based on language differences or on the inconveniences caused by residential segregation. However, Davenport highlights that in the DRC tradition of "internal holiness", infant baptism was considered to bestow "covenantal holiness" only on children of believers, and Christian and non-Christian communities were regarded as two static groups between which no movement was likely.<sup>58</sup>

In his article *The Welcoming Table? The Lord's Supper, exclusion, and the Reformed Tradition*, Robert Vosloo observes the Lord's Supper in another interesting angle when he writes about the Lord's Supper, hospitality and church discipline. In his argument he tries to relate the focus on the Lord's Supper as a feast of radical inclusion and hospitality to the need to protect the integrity of the meal through disciplined practices. However, Vosloo strongly argues that the Lord's Table is not a table of separation and exclusion, but it can be described as "the welcoming table".<sup>59</sup> His perspective on the Lord's Table as a welcoming table strongly criticises the infamous decision of the 1857 DRC Synod, as well as the whole idea of racial discrimination and separation of worship services. In fact, this proposition of Vosloo supports the 1829 Synod decision in many ways.

In his description of the Lord's Supper, Vosloo uses the word "unconditional acceptance of all participants" at the Lord's Supper in affirmation of the visible unity of Christ's body and the grace of the Host to show to that exclusion has no place at the Lord's Table. He therefore concludes that the Lord's Supper is inextricably linked to hospitality, as well as the need to challenge certain reductive practices of exclusion and restricted access. Vosloo seeks to understand whether the exclusion of people from the table as part of church discipline does not often result in a form of moral gatekeeping that threatens to negate the welcoming character of God's grace.<sup>60</sup> In strengthening his argument, Vosloo uses the infamous 1857

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<sup>58</sup> See R. Davenport, 1997. "Settlement, Conquest, and Theological Controversy: The Churches of Nineteenth century European Immigrants". In: Richard Elphick and Rodney Davenport (eds.) *Christianity in South Africa: A Political, Social, and Cultural History*, David Philip Publishers, 1997, 66

<sup>59</sup> See R. Vosloo, 2012. *The Welcoming Table? The Lord's Supper, Exclusion, and the Reformed Tradition*. In: E. Van der Borcht and P. van Geest (eds.), *Strangers and Pilgrims on Earth: Essays in Honour of Abraham van de Beek*, BRILL, Leiden, 2012, 483-484.

<sup>60</sup> See Vosloo, *The Welcoming Table?* 2012, 484.



DRC Synod decision as an example of the White church's fallacy in legitimising separate worship and separate celebration of the Lord's Supper. It must be noted that the 1857 DRC Synod decision is in contrast with what Vosloo proposes in his argument, the unconditional acceptance of all participants at the Lord's Supper, as well as what he describe as the welcoming table.

Elphick states that when issues of church division were raised again at the DRC Synod of 1857, the Synod had shed much of its dependence on government and the DRC mission effort had expanded. In response to the request of separate worship buildings, the DRC Synod of 1857 declared:

De Synod beschouwt het wenschlijk en Schriftmatig, dat onze ledematen uit de Heidenen, in onze bestaande gemeenten opgenomen en ingelijfd worden, overall war zulks geschieden kan; maar waar deze maatregel, ten gevolge van de zwakheid van sommigen, de bevordering van de zaak van Christus onder de Heidenen, in de weg zoude staan, de gemeente uitde Heidenen opgerigt, of nog op te rigten, hare Christelijke voorregten in een afzonderlijk gebouw of gesticht genieten zal.<sup>61</sup>

Elphick further notes that many of the DRC evangelical leaders deplored the colour prejudice of the Cape and expressed the hope that the wall of separation should fall. For Elphick, in their support for the Synod decision, in their own minds they were not ratifying racial prejudice, but simply recognising that because of "the weakness of some" (White people), it would not disappear rapidly. They gave priority to their principal goal of Christianising heathens and preventing *gelykstelling*, or racial equalisation.<sup>62</sup> Loff also emphasises this point that the separate congregations challenge was more than just a problem of 'colour difference', but colour prejudice, in other words *racism*. For Loff, although the synod declared that according to the Bible it was clear that differences of race and colour should not cause any differences in preaching the Gospel, the Synod also accepted that there was such a strong

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<sup>61</sup> *Acta Synodi NG Kerk 1857*, 59-60. The English translation of this 1857 Synod decision from Chris Loff reads: "The Synod considers it desirable and according to the Holy Scripture that our heathen members be accepted and initiated into our congregations wherever it is possible; but where this measure, as a result of the weakness of some, would stand in the way of promoting the work of Christ among the heathen people, then congregations set up among the heathen, or still to be set up, should enjoy their Christian privileges in a separate building or institution." See Loff, *The history of a heresy*, 1983, 19.

<sup>62</sup> See Elphick, *The equality of believers*: 2012, 43-44.

colour prejudice among the White people that they refused to tolerate the Black people in their midst, especially with regard to Holy Communion.<sup>63</sup>

Botha and also Loff convincingly argues that the 1857 Synod decision was decided on the request laid earlier on by the congregation in the Western Cape, to allow for the separate instruction of converts from the indigenous population, people of colour, slaves and free Black people. According to Botha, a group of White congregants at the time urged the presbytery of Stockenström in the Eastern Cape to have segregation at the communion table between White and Coloured people. Given their motivation of being unable to endure the fellowship of believers; ‘the communion of saints’ together with the indigenous peoples, because of cultural difference ... they asked permission to have Holy Communion services separately, without the intervention of Black and Coloured Christians, because of the “weakness of some.”<sup>64</sup> Loff also notes the Ceres Church Council meeting, considering erecting up a separate church building for Coloureds to worship on their own, contributed to the 1857 Synod decision. This proposal was turned down by Rev. Shand and the Church Council challenged their right to do so. An elder from Zwartland drew attention to the decision of the Presbytery of Albany in connection with the wishes of the White people in the congregation of Stockenström for separate Holy Communion services.<sup>65</sup> Without doubt these incidents paved the way to the DRC 1857 Synod decision.

In line with Botha on this request by the minority of White congregants in the Eastern Cape, Vosloo argues in reference to Loff that this request for separate communion was denied by the church council and that the same group made a second appeal to the church council, in which they then requested that they at least be served by White church council members after the Lord’s Supper had been celebrated by the rest of the congregation. In their appeal, however, they quoted the text in Romans 14:1, which reads, “welcome those who are weak in faith” stating that the church council must not be too harsh on their “weaknesses.”<sup>66</sup> The

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<sup>63</sup> See Loff, *The history of a heresy*, 1983, 19-20.

<sup>64</sup> See Botha, *Accounting for the hope that is in us of embodied unity*, 2002, 52.

<sup>65</sup> See Loff, *The history of a heresy*, 1983, 19.

<sup>66</sup> See Vosloo, *The Welcoming Table?* 2012, 485-486. Vosloo points out that Rev. Andrew Murray Senior played a major role in making this infamous decision be accepted by the DRC synod of 1857. He proposed that whilst the synod ideally wants to see that converts from heathendom be accepted and incorporated into the existing congregations, “due to the weakness of some” separate worship services could be allowed to advance the cause of Christ among the heathen. This proposal was brought to a vote and accepted with a large majority, Vosloo says, 2012, 486. Vosloo further notes that the decision of 1857 DRC synod deviated from a previous decision by the synod of 1829 in which the synod maintained that Holy Communion was to be administered

presbytery of Albany allowed the separation of the Lord's Supper and more tables were set afterwards to accommodate and serve their demand. It must be noted that the appeal of these White members and their request to be served by their fellow members was an indication of strong racial prejudice and the denial of Christ's existence in the lives of Black congregants.

The 1857 Synod's conclusion was that the most sensible practice would be to start teaching people from the indigenous groupings on premises geographically apart from those of the Dutch people. Davenport states that the NGK used this as a rationale, which they shared with English speaking churches, especially the Presbyterian Church, saying that Black Christians would feel more at home in their own churches than as subordinates in White churches.<sup>67</sup> Botha is of the opinion that what initially started off as an allowance for the "weakness of some", within Protestant Reformed circles in 1857, based on a wrong reading and explanation of the Gospel in Romans 14, eventually developed into a strict racial separation lifestyle however.<sup>68</sup> It is evident that the separation of the races in the church of God has perpetuated the motivation for the racial apartheid ideology, which led to different racial laws in South Africa. The church division or perhaps the disunity amongst Christians had a negative impact on the South African context.

Elphick affirms that in retrospect, the 1857 Synodical resolution may seem a portentous precedent of the DRC's later advocacy of apartheid. Yet, it merely gave official sanction to arrangements already common in practice.<sup>69</sup> This is evident when we look at the history of Christianity in South Africa since the arrival of Jan Van Riebeeck. This separation process within the Dutch Reformed family of churches became common practice and eventually determined the structure and order of the church and that of South African society. According to Pieter Coertzen, up until the end of the 18<sup>th</sup> century the Dutch Reformed Church had no specific missionary policy, and that converts and children out of the heathendom were taken up into existing Dutch Reformed congregations. Then at the end of the 18<sup>th</sup> century, missionary societies started working in South Africa, started to separate meetings for converts from the heathen and this eventually led to separate congregations. As Coertzen puts it:

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simultaneously to all members without distinction of colour or origin, because this practice was an unshakeable principle built on the infallible Word of God.

<sup>67</sup> See Davenport, *Settlement, Conquest, and Theological Controversy*: 1997, 66.

<sup>68</sup> See Botha, *Accounting for the hope that is in us of embodied unity*, 2002, 53.

<sup>69</sup> See Elphick, *The equality of believers*: 2012, 44.

After 1857 the mission congregations became mere annexures, copies of the white congregations without any representation on the church council, presbyteries, and synod or with any form of official connection between them.<sup>70</sup>

It must be noted that even before and after the 1857 Synod, there were schisms in the DRC and the new churches like the Volkskerk, the Nederduitsch Hervormde Kerk van Afrika (NHK), and the Gereformeerde Kerk (GK) emerged.<sup>71</sup> It can be stated that the DRC 1857 Synod decision became a decisive factor for church division on racial lines. Elphick highlights that S.P. Engelbrecht believed that the root cause of the founding of the NHK was the Voortrekkers' hostility to *gelykstelling*, or racial equalizing, especially in the Cape church.<sup>72</sup>

### **5.5. Racial segregation of worship services and the rise of apartheid policy**

Vosloo states that the 1857 Synod decision played at least some role in paving the way for the establishment of separate Dutch Reformed Churches along racial lines and that the mission policy of this church continued to play a major role in providing the moral underpinnings for the theological legitimisation of the policy of apartheid.<sup>73</sup> In 1880, the DRC synod decided to make it possible for its mission parishes to join into a segregated new order. In 1881, a separate Dutch Reformed Mission Church (DRMC) was established for 'Coloured' people. However, several other ethnic churches followed it. In 1951, the Dutch Reformed Church in Africa (DRCA) for Black people was established in the Eastern Cape. Again, in 1968 the Indian Reformed Church, better known as Reformed Church in Africa (RCA), was established in Natal for Indian people.

Adonis points out that there was no difference between the Coloured church and the White DRC congregants in terms of the confession, church governing, administration, language, but

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<sup>70</sup> See P. Coertzen, 2000. The Unity of the Family of Dutch Reformed Churches in South Africa: Then and now – prospects and frustrations - A Dutch Reformed Perspective. *Dutch Reformed Theological Journal*, Deel XXXXI Nommers 3&4 September & December, 2000, 181.

<sup>71</sup> For more information with regard to the details pertaining these schisms and the new churches that emerged from the Dutch Reformed Church: See Richard Elphick, 2012. *The equality of believers*: 2012, 44-51

<sup>72</sup> See Elphick, *The equality of believers*: 2012, 46.

<sup>73</sup> See Vosloo, *The Welcoming Table?* 2012, 486-487.

they were organised into separate ethnic churches.<sup>74</sup> This racial segregation of worship services was the result of the missionary work of the DRC. This move was seen to be one of “weakness”, rather than something that could in principle, be justified. Pauw notes that the DRC’s missionary policy of separate denominations for different ethnic groups fitted the apartheid model of separate development.<sup>75</sup>

It should be noted that the apartheid was already at work in a silent way when these churches were established. Charles Villa-Vicencio states that Allan Boesak observed that the White Dutch Reformed Churches must assume special responsibility for the prevailing apartheid policy of South Africa. Apartheid has been born in the womb of the White NGK. Details of the policy were worked out by that church and it has provided moral and theological justification for apartheid. According to Villa-Vicencio, shortly after the election of the National Party to power in 1948, *Die Kerkbode*, the official newspaper of the NGK, noted with pride: “As a church we have always worked purposefully for the separation of the races”. In this regard apartheid can rightfully be called a church policy.<sup>76</sup> The separation of worship services was clearly racism at its highest function. All the signs of racial prejudices and all other forms of injustice that arose from the church’s side affected the human community and social structures tremendously. In fact, the 1857 decision of the DRC Synod was not only executed in the church set up and church structures, but it was also directly applied in society. The South African society in the long run was structured exactly in the same way that the DRC has structured itself. Hence, this dissertation wants to propose that the unity of the church can make a positive contribution to social contexts in as much as church division and its legitimisation of apartheid harmed the society.

Some decades after the 1857 Synod decision, the reality of division expanded within the DRC and the idea of separate worship services was gradually introduced executed in many White DRC congregations. The Canadian peace researcher and expert on security and disarmament Ernie Regehr asserts that the moderator of the NGK, Dr. J.D. Vorster, emphatically rejected the idea of mixed worship. According to Regehr, J.D. Vorster once publicly said in his speech:

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<sup>74</sup> See Adonis, *Die afgebreekte skeidsmuur weer opgebou*: 1982, 60.

<sup>75</sup> See Pauw, *Anti-Apartheid Theology in the Dutch Reformed Family of Churches*: 2007, 58.

<sup>76</sup> See C. Villa-Vicencio, 1983, An all-pervading heresy: Racism and the ‘English-speaking Churches.’ In: *Apartheid is a heresy*: in John W. De Gruchy & Charles Villa-Vicencio (eds.), David Philip, Cape, 1983, 59.

We must create separate facilities for blacks in their own areas, and if there is no alternative we must give them Sundays off so that they can stay in their own houses and worship in their own churches.<sup>77</sup>

Furthermore, the separation of church worship services led to the separation of many other structures in society, including schools and universities. In his chapter titled *Creation and Apartheid: South African Theology since 1948*, Eugene M. Klaaren notes that in 1957, at a decisive point in the history of higher education in South Africa, Hendrik G. Stoker, the South African neo-Calvinist philosopher, advocated separate universities for Africans, White, and Coloured people.<sup>78</sup> It must be noted that the idea behind this was a well-structured apartheid policy that prevented any chances of unity in diversity in church and society. Klaaren argues that at this crossroads of policy and theory, Hendrik Stoker strongly urged the extension of apartheid education, which he took to be firmly supported in the comprehensive philosophy of lawful creation that he developed. Klaaren further says the neo-Calvinist line of thought also affirmed distinctly sovereign social spheres such as family, school, church, and state, each under the absolute sovereignty of the Creator, and this teaching was frequently used to support apartheid.<sup>79</sup>

A question could be asked whether the structuring of the DR family of churches according to racial order had any positive contribution to the church's involvement on issues of justice and reconciliation. In its witness to the world and as a social ethic, what did the DRC do to preserve the unity of the church, and to be the bearers of reconciliation between the racial groups that belonged to it? Instead, the DRC opted for racial prejudice and preached the gospel of apartheid as the way of life in church and society.

In his book *The Church Struggle in South Africa*, John de Gruchy writes:

We have seen enough already to know that racism in South Africa did not arrive when the National Party (NP) came to power in 1948 with its clarion call to apartheid. But 1948 is symbolic of a dramatic change in the meaning of racism for South Africans.<sup>80</sup>

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<sup>77</sup> See E. Regehr, 1979. *Perceptions of Apartheid*: Herald Press, Scottdale. 1979, 216-217.

<sup>78</sup> See E. M. Klaaren, 1997. *Creation and Apartheid: South African Theology since 1948*. In: Richard Elphick and Rodney Davenport (eds.) *Christianity in South Africa: A Political, Social, and Cultural History*, David Philips, 1997, 372.

<sup>79</sup> See Klaaren, *Creation and Apartheid*: 1997, 373.

<sup>80</sup> See John de Gruchy, 1986. *The Church Struggle in South Africa*: Second Edition, W.B. Eerdmans Company, Grand Rapids, 1986, 53.

De Gruchy further notes that racial discrimination was entrenched in the Union Constitution and determined much of the legislation between the year 1910 and 1948, but it did not have the rigid, ideological character that it began to assume under the apartheid slogan. It is evident that apartheid comes a long way. Churches have been dealing with the question of racism in South Africa for very long. Statements were issued in opposition of the situation and the spreading of racism all over South African society, including the church. Racism issue became a major concern, as it affected not only the life of the church, but it also caused a great harm to the life of the broader South African society. It can be said that racism, especially being driven by the church, became an ethical concern.

De Gruchy recalls that already in November 1948, the Episcopal Synod of the Church of the Province issued a lengthy statement on the race issue. The bishops agreed with the resolution of the Lambeth Conference earlier that year, which also declared: "That discrimination between men on the grounds of race alone is inconsistent with the principles of the Christian religion."<sup>81</sup> The implications of church division accumulated further and affected the whole South African context and churches who are not even affiliates of the DR family of churches. However, many churches in South Africa were divided along racial lines. As a result of racism, the South African society was structured in the same way.

Coertzen alludes to this fact when he states that cultural segregation became race segregation and this eventually led to apartheid as a policy. Coertzen cites Kinghorn, who described apartheid policy as a norm in the country that affected everything; the justice system, the social interaction between people, sport, the work place and also the church itself.<sup>82</sup> The apartheid policy closed down all the possible relations between Black and White people; and any bond of unity amongst South Africans. This situation also had an impact on the church and society. The seriousness of the apartheid policy could no longer be tolerated and some action to prevent further destruction of South African society by apartheid was the only route to be followed.

In opposition to the Afrikaner theology of creation that perpetuated injustices and gave feet to apartheid, a South African Black theology, which was a theology of struggle against injustices

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It is quite interesting to see how the churches engaged the government on the apartheid policy; they were never silent in opposing the policy.

<sup>81</sup> See De Gruchy, *The Church Struggle in South Africa*: 1986, 55.

<sup>82</sup> See Coertzen, *The Unity of the Family of Dutch Reformed Churches in South Africa*: 2000, 182.



in the township, church, and university emerged. Klaaren reckons that Black theology in its forceful opposition to Afrikaner law-and-order creationism, responded with a liberating theology of creation.<sup>83</sup> A number of South African Black theologians, such as Desmond Tutu, Manas Buthelezi, Allan Boesak, Russel Botman, Takatso Mofokeng, Buti Tlhagale and Itumeleng Mosala, to mention but a few, in favour of Black theology of liberation were vocal against apartheid in South Africa.

The churches in South Africa combined under the umbrella body of the South African Council of Churches (SACC) fought against racism and apartheid. As Dolamo puts it: “The testimony of the churches in the South African struggle through the SACC against oppression, domination and liberation, has been that of prophecy to protest to resistance.”<sup>84</sup> According to Dolamo, the prophetic function of the church is basic to all the other functions and it includes all of them. This type of prophecy that Dolamo suggests is an ability to read a situation correctly by doing social analysis and suggesting solutions to the problems. In this case, the problem of apartheid as racism and heresy was tackled and apartheid was therefore condemned on ethical grounds. As a result of the apartheid system, the South African society as a whole suffered the consequences. The consequences of apartheid and racism in South Africa are much bigger than the problem itself that could have been solved a long time ago. Division is always costly and it always carries negative outcomes for church and society. The voices of the churches and political organisations against racism grew, whilst the government on the one hand maintained the status quo on apartheid and racism. This situation did not only affect the Christians in South Africa, but it seriously contaminated the South African society as a whole.

The World Alliance of Reformed Churches (WARC) – later known as the World Communion of Reformed Churches (WCRC) in 1982 in Ottawa declared apartheid as heresy and sin, a *status confessionis* was declared and the Dutch Reformed Mission Church at its Synod in 1978 declared that the ideology of apartheid is in conflict with the teaching of the gospel on unity and on reconciliation. At its Synod in 1982 the DRMC strongly opposed the ideology of apartheid and laying the facts on equal status of people of God, the unity of the church, the work of Christ’s reconciliation and the justice of God through the formulation and the draft of

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<sup>83</sup> See Klaaren, *Creation and Apartheid*: 1997, 377.

<sup>84</sup> See R.T.H. Dolamo, 2000. “The South African Church Struggle against Apartheid (1948-1990): A theological-ethical critique”. *NGTT Deel XXXXI* Nommers 3 & 4 September & December 2000, 225.



the Belhar Confession. The Belhar Confession confessed God as the God of unity, of reconciliation and justice.

## 5.6. Conclusion

This chapter aimed to provide important background for the rest of this dissertation, especially with regard to the question of ecclesiological divisions that impacts negatively towards the church's witness in society. These divisions pose a threat to the life of the church and its witness to issues of justice and peace in society. It can be concluded that the seriousness of the segregation policy in the form of racial prejudice or racism gave birth to the apartheid policy in South Africa. The DRC entertained the segregation policy within church circles and later legitimised the apartheid policy of the White government in South Africa. What started as a challenge on sharing the Holy Communion simultaneously gradually became a racial challenge that opened the door to separate church building and later it developed to the policy apartheid.

Richard Elphick alludes to this fact when he states that in the nineteenth century, the Dutch Reformed Church, the spiritual home of most Dutch-speaking settlers, pioneered the practice of segregated churches, and in the twentieth century, decisively shaped apartheid theory.<sup>85</sup> Elphick went on to state that, paradoxically, by the time it reached its greatest power, the DRC had become one of the most evangelical, mission-minded churches in the country. However, Elphick notes that there was a severe tension within the DRC between two of its most fervently held commitments, which are to evangelise people of colour and to preserve white supremacy.<sup>86</sup> This became a serious challenge to ecclesiology with its relation to ethics. The claims for these ecclesiological divisions within the DRC explained clearly that the understanding of ethics in baptism and the ethical implications of the Holy Communion were radically challenged by the White congregants.

The WCC conference at Santiago de Compostela (as discussed in chapter three of this dissertation) radically, albeit indirectly, challenges this idea and practise of the DRC with regard to baptism and Holy Communion. The Santiago conference under the theme “*Koinonia* in Faith, Life and Witness” pleads for unity in diversity and that such unity must express itself

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<sup>85</sup> See Elphick, *The equality of believers*: 2012, 39.

<sup>86</sup> See Elphick, *The equality of believers*: 2012, 39.

in social contexts in terms of communion in faith, in life and in our witnessing together on issues of justice. Furthermore, the Ecclesiology and Ethics debate of the WCC under *Costly Commitment* and *Costly Obedience* (as discussed in chapter four of this dissertation) also strongly emphasises that both, baptism and the Eucharist are significant sacraments that can be used as tools for moral formation. At the same time, the formative aspect of the Eucharist is based on the fact that the Lord's Table is an open invitation to overcome deeply entrenched suspicion, divisions and hostilities over equalisation or the *gelykstelling* fear of the DRC. The fear for equalisation is one of the highlights of the deep and entrenched racial prejudice by the White congregants as discussed by Elphick, Loff and others. In my opinion, no matter whether the people of colour could become Christians, for White people that would not lead to viewing them as equals. Later in this dissertation the Belhar Confession will address this question of equalisation (*gelykstelling*) as a challenge of *Costly Justice*. The Belhar Confession as an ecclesiology and ethics study addresses the question of the compassionate justice of God as a challenge to social justice.

All the above mentioned events had serious implications for the unity of the church, as well as its social significance to the South African context. In fact, the ethical implications of these events had a negative influence in the life of the church and society. Nicolaas Hofmeyr also affirmed that the segregation on racial grounds and the divisions between Black and White people impacts negatively towards society and he rejects separation. The question of equality (over against the idea of *geen gelykstelling*) remains the biggest challenge for the church in South Africa today, especially with regard to church unity and the response of the church to socio-economic and other ethical challenges that are a threat to unity. Pauw states that the three "daughter" churches of the DRC officially opposed the apartheid later between 1970s and 1980s. Pauw cites Johannes Adonis, who once said:

Most churches and Christians found the apartheid ideology to be in direct conflict with their biblical and Christian beliefs. Since 1948 the practical implementation of apartheid had caused untold suffering, poverty, despair and great loss of life. One has but to think of the forced removals of 3.5 million people, the establishment of the homelands, the implementation of the Group Areas Act and the migrant labour system to realise this...It is striking that during the whole history of apartheid the churches did not make this judgement from the very

beginning. They began by gradually criticising various aspects of apartheid and only later demanded the total abolition of the entire apartheid system.<sup>87</sup>

Adonis, in a nutshell, summarises the injustices and the position taken up by the White DRC and its involvement in the apartheid system since its inception. The injustices of removing the Khoikhoi people from their own land, the dehumanisation of the Khoisan people by Jan van Riebeeck calling them bad names, the abuse of people by being used as slaves in their own land and the separation of services; all these were signs of racism and apartheid for years.

In fact, the division of churches was a strategy of silencing the argument over racial discrimination in the church. Many churches and ecumenical church bodies like the SACC played a fundamental role in the struggle against apartheid in South Africa. However, this chapter sheds more light on the reality of divisions in South African context. This reality of divisions was mainly supported by the church on biblical grounds, and this alone says a lot about the Christian unity and its social implications that this dissertation proposes. In this regard I must underline that the social implications of these divisions were very clear and that the involvement of the DRC points to the weakness of its credible witness in the world.

The divisions of the DR family of churches on racial grounds remained a challenge that existed for decades. One can further state that this also challenges the existing internal unity of the Uniting Reformed Church in Southern Africa (URCSA), which seems to keep this status quo of being a united but racially divided church. It is evident that the DRC neglected its calling to witness on justice and reconciliation. In fact, this chapter reveals that there is more to be done by the church if it wants to be called as such. In an attempt to address the injustices mentioned in this chapter, the churches under WARC declared a *status confessionis* and later, the DRMC and the Belhar Confession was drafted in 1982. The next chapter will briefly discuss the road to the formulation of the Belhar Confession by looking at the history of the *status confessionis*, the purpose, and the structure of this confession.

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<sup>87</sup> See Pauw, *Anti-Apartheid Theology in the Dutch Reformed Family of Churches*: 2007, 56.

## Chapter 6

### **The road to Belhar: towards confessing unity, reconciliation and justice**

#### **6.1. Introduction**

The ecclesial challenges with regard to church divisions within the Dutch Reformed Church (DRC) and its dealings with ethical issues that call for justice such as inequality, racial segregation and racial prejudice paved the way to the formulation of the Belhar Confession debate on ecclesiology and ethics within the South African context.

The legitimisation of apartheid in South Africa by the DRC was met by resistance from the side of other Dutch Reformed sister churches and various other faith communities, as well as from the side of political organisations. It became evident that apartheid was too strong for a divided church, to borrow the words of Archbishop Desmond Mpilo Tutu. Amidst these realities of division, Christians in South Africa raised their voice against the apartheid policy and oppression using various platforms contesting for unity, reconciliation and justice. Confessing unity, reconciliation and justice summarises the focus of the Belhar Confession. This chapter briefly summarises the road to the formulation of the Belhar Confession of the Uniting Reformed Church in Southern Africa (URCSA) as a document aiming at confessing unity, reconciliation and justice.

This chapter will look at the brief historical background of the *status confessionis* that led to the declaration of the apartheid as heresy, in 1982 by the World Alliance of Reformed Churches (WARC), and later by the previously Dutch Reformed Mission Church (DRMC). A summary of the history that resulted in the formulation of the Belhar Confession will be briefly discussed in this chapter. I will also look at the purpose of the Belhar Confession and conclude by briefly analysing its structure, which gives us the key issues or the contents of the confession itself. The reason why the Belhar Confession is so crucial for this dissertation is that it deals with the question of ecclesiology and ethics. Just as the Ecclesiology and Ethics debate of the WCC, the Belhar Confession also wrestles with the question of church unity on the one hand, and with the role of the church with regard to socio-ethical challenges on the other hand. Both the Ecclesiology and Ethics debate and the Belhar Confession debate on ecclesiology and ethics points to the significant role that church unity can play in social

contexts, especially with regard to issues of peace, reconciliation and justice and the integrity of creation. The Belhar Confession, with its focus on ecclesiology and ethics in the South African context, also contributes significantly to the ecumenical debate on ecclesiology and ethics. The two debates on ecclesiology and ethics complement each other on the unity of the church on the one hand, and the church's witness and service in the world, especially its witness on ethical issues of justice on the other hand. Both debates – one can say – speak of *Costly Unity* that requires Christian's *Costly Commitment* towards *Costly Reconciliation*, which is not cheap, and that such reconciliation goes hand in hand with *Costly Justice* that we owe to each other in a *Costly Obedience* to God and to each other.

The Belhar Confession was adopted in Belhar in 1982 as a draft confession, and in 1986 at the DRMC Synod this confession was officially signed and declared as the confession of the DRMC. As a reflection on the response of the churches on apartheid and the road that led to the formulation of the Belhar Confession, this chapter will draw on some primary sources such as synodical documents, as well as the work of scholars such as Cloete and Smit, Botha and Naudé, Naudé, Adonis, Henriksson, and Plaatjies-Van Huffel.<sup>88</sup>

It is perhaps true to say that the decision on the Belhar Confession by the DRC at its Synod meeting in 2011<sup>89</sup> does not mean that church unity, true reconciliation and commitment to compassionate justice will now come easy. It does not even mean that the memories and wounds of the past will just vanish. There is still more to be done with regard to our commitment to peace and reconciliation within the DR family of churches in order for these churches to achieve unity. Hence, it is so important for the DR family of churches to look back at this gloomy history and be reminded of the pain and the damaged caused by the

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<sup>88</sup> See D.J. Smit, 1984. What does Status Confessionis mean? In: *A Moment of Truth: The Confession of the Dutch Reformed Mission Church 1982*. William B. Eerdmans, Michigan. See J. Botha and P. Naudé, 2011. *Good News to Confess: The Belhar Confession and the road of acceptance*, Bible Media, Wellington. See Piet Naudé, 2010. *Neither Calendar nor Clock: Perspectives on the Belhar Confession*, William B. Eerdmans, Michigan. See J.C. Adonis, 2006. The history of Belhar: *NGTT, Teologiese Tydskrif*, Deel 47 Nommers 1&2 Maart en Junie, See L. Henriksson, 2010. *A Journey with a Status Confessionis: Analysis of an apartheid related conflict between the Dutch Reformed Church in South Africa and the World Alliance of the Reformed Churches, 1982-1998*, Swedish Institute of Missionary Research, Sweden. See M. Plaatjies-Van Huffel, 2013. Reading the Belhar Confession as a historical text, in: Mary-Anne Plaatjies-Van Huffel and Robert Vosloo (eds.), *Reformed Churches in South Africa and the Struggle For Justice: Remembering 1960-1990*, SUN MeDIA, Stellenbosch.

<sup>89</sup> For a brief overview on the acceptance of the Belhar Confession by the DRC General Synod see the introductory chapter and the October 2013 DRC General Synod decision register on church re-unification and Article 1 of the DRC and the Belhar Confession: <http://www.ngkerkas.co.za/wp-content/2013/09/besluiteregister-algemene-sinode-2013.pdf> [Accessed 24 April 2014].

apartheid. In remembering these historical events, it is significant that we reflect on why the *status confessionis* was so crucial to be declared.

## 6.2. What does the *status confessionis* mean?

The act of confession in the DRMC was called forth by a particular historical moment of extraordinary seriousness and threat and was offered in the hope of bringing about radical transformation in that situation. This was simply another way of expressing the conviction that the church found itself in a *status confessionis*. In his explanation of the *status confessionis*, Dirkie Smit states that it is a strong expression applied to a very important issue and extremely serious situation, but exactly what that issues is or what the suppositions or implications may be, is less obvious.<sup>90</sup> Smit argues that the church was deeply conscious that moments of such seriousness can arise in the life of the church that it may feel need to confess its faith anew in the light of a specific situation. There was an awareness that such an act of confession is not lightly undertaken, but only if it is considered that the heart of the Gospel is so threatened as to be at stake.

For South Africa, the specific situation was racism, the apartheid system and its theology. The issue concerning the question or whether certain situations in the church were “neutral matters” or whether the Gospel was at stake, was raised for the first time during the sixteenth century discussions. Smit points out that the conviction gradually grew that something which may be neutral under “normal circumstances”, in the sense that it could be done or not done without endangering the heart of the Gospel itself, may suddenly attain such grave importance that it becomes a matter in which the Gospel is indeed threatened.<sup>91</sup> Smit further underlines that in the twentieth century this conviction was applied again, especially in connection with three important conflicts in the Christian church. The first was called the German church struggle (*Kirchenkampf*) when the confessing church in Germany opposed the German Christians, who were loyal to Adolf Hitler and advocated the exclusion of Jews from the offices of the church.<sup>92</sup> The Confessing Church argued that church structures and arrangements of church discipline, which are “neutral matters” under normal circumstances

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<sup>90</sup> See D.J. Smit, 1984. What does Status Confessionis mean? In: *A Moment of Truth: The Confession of the Dutch Reformed Mission Church 1982*. William B. Eerdmans, Michigan. 1984, 7 See also this article in Afrikaans, D.J. Smit, 2008. Wat beteken “status confessionis?” in *Geloof en Openbare Lewe, Versamelde Opstelle 2*, Nico Koopman (ed.), Sun Media, 2008, 203-230.

<sup>91</sup> See Smit, What does Status Confessionis mean? 1984, 7.

<sup>92</sup> See Smit, What does Status Confessionis mean? 1984, 7.

and may therefore be handled in many ways, can become of such fundamental importance in a specific situation that the very essence of the church and the credibility of the Gospel itself are threatened.<sup>93</sup>

According to Smit, the second church debate where the expression *status confessionis* has featured was the ecumenical rejection of racism. It is at this point that in 1977 at Dar es Salaam, the Lutheran World Federation (LWF) announced a *status confessionis* concerning racism and apartheid and further declared that the situation did not merely involve “neutral matters”, but the essence of the church itself.<sup>94</sup> Smit further states that an appeal was made to member churches with regard to their expression on this matter. The Lutheran World Federation pleaded with the White member churches in Southern Africa to acknowledge that the situation constitutes a *status confessionis*, meaning that the churches on the basis of their faith and in order to make the unity of the church visible will have to reject the apartheid system publicly and unambiguously.<sup>95</sup>

Lennart Henriksson further highlights that in 1977, the General Council of the WARC could not meet as a result of financial problems, instead, the Alliance decided to have a minor meeting to celebrate its centenary. The General Secretary, Dr. Perret gave a summarised report from 1970-1977, and further indicated the actions for the coming executive. Amongst the concerns was the defective co-operation between the South African member churches that has never improved despite all the efforts made by the WARC. Around 1978 the question on church/state-relations became an issue reflected more deeply upon in the WARC, especially regarding the DRC and its relation to the apartheid state. The WARC’s perspective was that the situation in South Africa is deteriorating. Henriksson adds that it is for this reason that the WARC representatives organised a consultation with the member churches in South Africa. The following themes were discussed: “The Church and Social Responsibility, labour and economy, especially regarding the problem with the migratory situation; the mixed marriage situation; racial discrimination; and all laws hampering personal relationships, especially the Group Areas Act, The Pass Law, and the Race Classification Act.”<sup>96</sup> The WARC was

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<sup>93</sup> See Smit, What does Status Confessionis mean? 1984, 7-8.

<sup>94</sup> See Smit, What does Status Confessionis mean? 1984, 8.

<sup>95</sup> See Smit, What does Status Confessionis mean? 1984, 13.

<sup>96</sup> See L. Henriksson, 2010. *A Journey with a Status Confessionis: Analysis of an apartheid related conflict between the Dutch Reformed Church in South Africa and the World Alliance of the Reformed Churches, 1982-1998*, Swedish Institute of Missionary Research, Sweden, 2010, 158-161.



saddened by the theology of apartheid within the Dutch Reformed Churches, let alone its practice.

The White member churches were continually challenged to take a stand on this matter, and indicate whether they supported or rejected apartheid. Perhaps the White member churches found it very difficult to stand publicly against their government and its policies, as they also benefited from the system. However, we read from Charles Villa-Vicencio that some DRC church ministers, such as Dr J.D. Vorster, who was the Moderator of the NGK in the Cape, and Dr. A.P. Treurnicht, a former minister of the NGK and leader of the Conservative Party, supported the apartheid policy wholeheartedly, whilst others within the DRC rejected it as a policy that safeguards the political and economic privileges of White people at the expense of Black people, and that they view the policy as sinful and heretical.<sup>97</sup> This also could mean that the White member churches of the WARC, as much as they benefited from the apartheid system on the one hand, neglected their obligation for church unity and their calling to witness on issues of peace and justice in the world on the other hand. Smit notes that since that time a lively discussion had continued in the Lutheran World Community. At the meeting of WARC in Ottawa in August 1982, a similar resolution was adopted.<sup>98</sup>

In his article titled *Belhar as Public Theology – Honouring Jaap Durand*, the South African Reformed theologian Christo Lombard, makes important remarks on public theology, as well as on the similarities and differences between Belhar and Barmen, and further gives insight into the contribution of various organisations such as Lutheran World Federation (1977) and the WARC (1982), as well as the Programme to Combat Racism (1969). Lombard further explores the effect that the Belhar Confession and the *Kairos Document* had, and refers to the fact that all oppressed people – not only the “church people” – sensed that a word of justice was spoken which became a word of hope and a word of encouragement.<sup>99</sup>

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<sup>97</sup> See C. Villa-Vicencio, 1983, An all-pervading heresy: Racism and the ‘English-speaking Churches.’ In: *Apartheid is a heresy*: in John W. De Gruchy & Charles Villa-Vicencio (eds.), David Philip, Cape Town, 1983, 59-60.

<sup>98</sup> See Smit, What does Status Confessionis mean? 1984, 8.

<sup>99</sup> See C. Lombard, 2009. Belhar as public theology – Honouring Jaap Durand. In: *Discerning God’s Justice in Church, Society and Academy: Festschrift for Jaap Durand*. Ernst Conradie & Christo Lombard (eds.), SUN MeDIA, Stellenbosch, 2009, 93-129.



At a conference held at Stellenbosch in May 2012 under the theme “The role of the Reformed Churches in the struggle for justice in South Africa: Remembering 1960-1990”<sup>100</sup> the South African church historian Johan van der Merwe, in his contribution titled *The Dutch Reformed Church from Ras, Volk en Nasie to Kerk en Samelewing: The struggle goes on*, underlines that, on the basis of the view that the DRC had attempted to justify apartheid by misusing the gospel and the Reformed confession, their membership was suspended as the results of the report on “Racism and South Africa.” According to Van der Merwe, the report declared:

...this situation constitutes a *status confessionis* for our churches, which means that we regard this as an issue on which it is not possible to differ without seriously jeopardizing the integrity of our common confession as Reformed Churches. We declare; with black Reformed Christians of South Africa that apartheid is a sin, and that the moral and theological justification of it is a travesty of the gospel, and in its disobedience to the Word of God, a theological heresy.<sup>101</sup>

There were different feelings from the DRC members at their General Synod in October 1982 with regard to this decision to suspend this church from participating in WARC. However, apart from these mixed reactions, W.D. Jonker, a minister of the DRC pleaded with the members of this church saying that it is now important that the DRC distance itself from every form of racism, not because of Ottawa, but because racism is a sin.<sup>102</sup>

In relation to the same Ottawa meeting, Henriksson states that the General Council of the World Alliance of Reformed Churches gathered in Ottawa under these words: “God in Jesus Christ has affirmed human dignity [and] has reconciled people to God and to themselves” in

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<sup>100</sup> The contributions at this conference were published in a book titled *Reformed Churches in South Africa and the Struggle for Justice: Remembering 1960-1990*, Mary-Anne Plaatjies-Van Huffel and Robert Vosloo (eds.), SUN MeDIA, Stellenbosch. The book consists of six different sections in which Reformed Churches remember this history. The first sections deals with Memory and Reformed Identity, especially the memory with regard to the struggle for justice in South Africa and the Reformed identity in South Africa. The second section deals with: Remembering the role of Reformed Churches, especially their contribution with regards to Cottesloe and Rustenberg, to mention but a few. The third section covers the Remembering of the Reception of Reformed Theologians and Theological Currents, and the fourth sections deals with Remembering Prominent South African Reformed Voices such as those of Beyers Naudé, Willie Jonker, Johan Heyns and others. The fifth section deals with Remembering Reformed Documents such as the Belhar Confession as well as Church and Society. The last section covers the Remembering of the Ecumenical, Public and International Engagement, especially with regard to WARC and the TRC in South Africa.

<sup>101</sup> See J. van der Merwe, 2013. *The Dutch Reformed Church from Ras, Volk en Nasie to Kerk en Samelewing: The struggle goes on*, in: Mary-Anne Plaatjies-Van Huffel and Robert Vosloo (eds.), *Reformed Churches in South Africa and the Struggle For Justice: Remembering 1960-1990*, SUN MeDIA, Stellenbosch, 2013, 58.

<sup>102</sup> See Van der Merwe, *The Dutch Reformed Church from Ras, Volk en Nasie to Kerk en Samelewing*: 2013, 59.

the search for a resolution on Racism and South Africa.<sup>103</sup> Henriksson further states that at the WARC meeting in Ottawa, a reference was made to Ephesians 4:5f about Jesus as the “Lord of His church who has brought us together in the one Lord, one faith, one baptism”, and at that time, the churches demanded of themselves a confrontation on racism, even a struggle against it. The South African situation of racism was brought forward once again for discussion in Ottawa.<sup>104</sup> In his article titled *Many Good Words – Little Action? The World Alliance of Reformed Churches and the “South Africa Question”, 1960-1990*, Lennart Henriksson highlights the scene of the seriousness of other Reformed churches from South Africa in their struggle against racism when they refused to share Holy Communion with the delegates of the DRC at the WARC meeting in Ottawa. They declared in their message that sharing Holy Communion with them would mean in their own words: “eating and drinking judgment upon ourselves ... as the theological heresy which undergirds apartheid racism finds its origin in separate communion.”<sup>105</sup> For Henriksson this message evoked a clear debate and caused some uneasiness during the meeting.<sup>106</sup> In South Africa, the possibility and necessity of a confessing church had been mentioned on various occasions since 1960. For instance, the *Message to the People* (1968)<sup>107</sup> of the SACC and the CI was regarded by many as a possible base for a confessing church.

Another debate around the idea of *status confessionis* was being carried on in Germany. According to Smit the *Reformierter Bund* (RB), a segment of the large German Protestant Church (the *Evangelische Kirche Deutschlands*, [EKD] which also includes the Lutherans) announced a *status confessionis* on the possession of nuclear arms in 1982.<sup>108</sup> All these debates required the conviction of the church at these challenging times and the church could

<sup>103</sup> See Henriksson, *A Journey with a Status Confessionis*: 2010, 154-155.

<sup>104</sup> See Henriksson, *A Journey with a Status Confessionis*: 2010, 155.

<sup>105</sup> See L. Henriksson, 2013. *Many Good Words – Little Action? The World Alliance of Reformed Churches and the “South Africa Question”, 1960-1990*, in: Mary-Anne Plaatjies-Van Huffel and Robert Vosloo (eds.), *Reformed Churches in South Africa and the Struggle For Justice: Remembering 1960-1990*, SUN MeDIA, Stellenbosch, 2013, 359.

<sup>106</sup> See Henriksson, *Many Good Words – Little Action?* 2013, 359.

<sup>107</sup> For an authorised summary of ‘The Message to the People of South Africa, see Piet Naudé, 2010. *Neither Calendar nor Clock: Perspectives on the Belhar Confession*, William B. Eerdmans, Michigan, 2010, 233-236. In short, the Message to the People states: “We are under an obligation to confess anew our commitment to the universal faith of Christians, the eternal Gospel of salvation and security in Christ Jesus alone. The Gospel of Jesus Christ is the good news that in Christ God has broken down the walls of division between God and man, and between man and man.” The Message to the People further states, “We believe that this doctrine of separation is a false faith, a novel gospel; it inevitably is in conflict with the Gospel of Jesus Christ, which offers salvation, both individual and social, through faith in Christ alone. It is keeping people away from the real knowledge of Christ; therefore it is the Church’s duty to enable our people to distinguish between the demands of the South African state and the demands of Christian discipleship.”

<sup>108</sup> See Smit, *What does Status Confessionis mean?* 1984, 8.

not be silent any longer. From the South African perspective, the debate in the DRMC Synod that led to the act of confession was in fact a debate about the question whether a *status confessionis* should be declared. It must be noted that it was during this debate that the Synod was reminded of Karl Barth's contributions on the nature of a *status confessionis*, which caused the Synod to decide to explain itself to all concerned by way of a positive confession of its faith in the Gospel. In fact, racism in South Africa today is like a silent war and it manifests itself in different ways.<sup>109</sup> Smit notes that the term *status confessionis* has also been frequently applied in the debate on nuclear armament. He states that in 1958, Barth wrote, at first anonymously, a number of theses in which he objected to the godless character of nuclear arms. For Protestantism, a *status confessionis* is by definition a moment of truth, a moment in which a Christian community are of the opinion that a situation has developed, a moment of truth has dawned, in which nothing less than the Gospel itself is at stake, so that they feel compelled to witness and act over against this threat.<sup>110</sup>

Smit further underlines that the 1978 Synod of the DRMC adopted a number of strong resolutions with regard to the ideology of apartheid and rejected it as being in conflict with the teaching of the gospel on church unity and on reconciliation.<sup>111</sup> In line with Smit,

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<sup>109</sup> It is clear that apartheid has caused a great harm to the church and South African society. Although we live in a new dispensation, in a new democratic South Africa, a Rainbow nation as it became to be known, racism is still the greatest enemy in this beautiful country. For instance, after the Truth and Reconciliation Commission in South Africa people still hate and kill in the name of apartheid. From both sides, for Black and White South Africans, anger is still written in many faces. We see this through farm killings, torturing of Black people in farms, and violence among different racial groups that is perpetrated by racism. The xenophobic attacks amongst Black people are none other racism at its highest peak. But I want to argue that it is very sad to use apartheid at this point in time of a developing South Africa as a defense mechanism for our wrong doings. I agree that apartheid has caused great harm to humanity, but in this new dispensation we do not need to repeat the past. The daily events that continue to take place in South Africa now are calling the church to respond, yet the church is very silent in our society.

<sup>110</sup> See Smit, What does Status Confessionis mean? 1984, 10.

<sup>111</sup> See Smit, What does Status Confessionis mean? 1984, 13.

For further reading on the history leading to the Belhar Confession, read the contribution of Prof. J.C. Adonis at the Barmen / Belhar Consultation on the 18 October 2004 at Belhar. See J.C. Adonis, 2006. The history of Belhar: *NGTT, Teologiese Tydskrif*, Deel 47 Nommers 1&2 Maart en Junie, 2006, 234-239. Adonis mentioned that after the Synod discussed the position of apartheid as contradictory to the gospel of Jesus Christ, the synod also rejected the mission policy of the DR Church and made a very clear decision in favour of the re-unification of the family of DR Churches. For Adonis, the decision that the policy of apartheid is contrary to the gospel also strengthened the desire for structural unification, 2006, 235. However, Adonis also highlights the contribution played by theology students of the DRMC in evaluation of the apartheid under the leadership of Prof Jaap Durand at the University of the Western Cape. He states that the students came to a conclusion that the forced separation of people contradicts the gospel of reconciliation. This was echoed by Prof. D.J. Smit in his contribution at the same conference on Barmen / Belhar, when he mentioned most key players that contributed to the Belhar Confession history. Smit also draws a close connection between Barmen and Belhar and in conversation with each other. For interest in this history leading to Belhar with the influence of Barmen Declaration, read D.J. Smit, 2006. Barmen and Belhar in Conversation: a South African Perspective. *NGTT, Teologiese Tydskrif*, Deel 47 Nommers 1&2 Maart en Junie, 2006, 291-301. See also H.R. Botman, 2006. Barmen to Belhar: A Contemporary Confessing Journey. *NGTT, Teologiese Tydskrif*, Deel 47 Nommers 1&2

Henriksson also points out that an important work on the theological scrutiny of the apartheid ideology was carried forth at the theological department at the University of the Western Cape, the so-called Coloured University at the outskirts of Cape Town. Henriksson argues that it was presented before the DRMC synod of 1978 and is one major reason for the proposal of the *status confessionis* discussion in Ottawa in 1982.<sup>112</sup> It must be noted that the time had come for the church to voice its stance with regard to socio-ethical challenges, which also engulfed the life of the church. I want to highlight the fact that apartheid and racism were extreme in this regard in the contamination of the life of the church and society. In fact, the church had to declare whether it is in favour of justice or injustice before bringing the question of how to reconcile the South African society.

The South African Reformed theologian Johan Botha states that in rejection of apartheid, the DRMC Synod of 1978 voiced its conviction on the policy of apartheid and decided that:

- Because, contrary to the way in which the gospel of Christ is directed at the reconciliation of humankind with God and with neighbour, the enforced separation of people on the grounds of race and colour is at heart based on the conviction that people separated in this way are irreconcilable.
- Because the system that flows from such a policy would and did of necessity lead to increased polarisation between people, particularly because it was irrefutably shown that, in practice, only one part of the population – namely, the White people – benefited from this system and that, as a consequence, the gospel's demand that justice be shown to all was not met.
- Because it not only affected the human dignity of the non-privileged parts of the population, but also the human dignity of all concerned with it.<sup>113</sup>

The rejections of the DRMC Synod points conclusively underline that apartheid creates divisions amongst races and it causes a serious harm to the whole creation of God. In a way the Synod also highlights the fact that apartheid is malformation, it is against the unity of the church and the unity in society. This is exactly what the Johannesburg WCC consultation later

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Maart en Junie, 2006, 240-249. All these papers were read at Barmen / Belhar Consultation on the 18-19 October 2004. The history on Barmen Declaration (1934) and the Belhar Confession (1986) was retold. Russel Botman was amongst the young theologians who evaluated apartheid policy under the leadership of Prof. Jaap Durand. In his contribution at the consultation, Botman tells how they were challenged about this evaluation of apartheid and their conclusion.

<sup>112</sup> See Henriksson, *A Journey with a Status Confessionis*: 2010, 55.

<sup>113</sup> See J. Botha, 2011. *Belhar – a staff to lean on today and tomorrow*: in Johan Botha and Piet Naudé: *Good News to Confess: The Belhar Confession and the road of acceptance*, Bible Media, Wellington, 2011, 70-71.

discussed regarding the South African situation on racism and apartheid under the theme of *Costly Obedience*. Smit states that on the 14<sup>th</sup> of February 1980, the Black delegates at a consultation on racism of the South African Council of Churches at Hammanskraal appealed to White Christians to show their willingness to purify the church of racism. The same year in August, the Central Committee of the World Council of Churches in Geneva released a declaration on South Africa in which an appeal was made on the World Council and all its member churches together with all other Christians to witness that apartheid was a sin, which was to be rejected as a travesty of the Gospel, because it was in conflict with the fundamental truths of faith.<sup>114</sup> The following year in October 1981 the Alliance of Black Reformed Christians in Southern Africa (ABRECSA) held its first conference at Hammanskraal, where Allan Boesak, in his address on the theme *Black and Reformed: Burden or Challenge?* pleaded for a Black rediscovery in the South African situation of the basic Reformed convictions, but he went even further by declaring that he believe Black Christians should formulate a Reformed confession for their time and their situation in their own words.<sup>115</sup> It is evident that this call by Boesak was a call for the Reformed Christians to confess its faith anew, especially with regard to the apartheid and racism situation that caused a lot of pain, anger and animosity in South Africa. In fact, this was in some sense a call for a *status confessionis*.

In the final Alliance of Black Reformed Christians in Southern Africa charter, something like this was implemented when a theological basis was composed in which five matters were raised in the style of the confession. These matters were the authority of the Word of God; the Lordship of Christ; the Christian responsibility for the World; the authority of the state; and the unity of the Church. Smit states that these were immediately followed by a declaration which read:

We ... unequivocally declare that apartheid is a sin and that the moral and theological justification of it is a travesty of the Gospel, a betrayal of the Reformed tradition, and a heresy.<sup>116</sup>

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<sup>114</sup> See Smit, What does Status Confessionis mean? 1984, 14.

<sup>115</sup> See Smit, What does Status Confessionis mean? 1984, 14. See also J.W. De Gruchy, 1983. Towards a Confessing Church: The implications of a heresy: in *Apartheid is a Heresy*: J.W. De Gruchy and C. Villa-Vicencio (eds.), David Philip, Cape Town, 1983, 78. Allan Boesak argued that the Reformed tradition has a future in South Africa only if black Reformed Christians are willing to take it up, make it truly their own and let this tradition once again become what it was: a champion of the cause of the poor and the oppressed, clinging to the confession of the Lordship of Christ and to the supremacy of the Word of God.

<sup>116</sup> See Smit, What does Status Confessionis mean? 1984, 14.

Although the term *status confessionis* is not used here, this point of view according to Smit would play a significant role at the meeting of the World Alliance of Reformed Churches in Ottawa during August 1982.

Coming back to the Ottawa gathering, Smit states that on the 25<sup>th</sup> of August 1982, the WARC meeting issued a detailed declaration on *Racism and South Africa*, which had three fundamental sections. The first part dealt with Racism and South Africa, the second part dealt with implications for the membership of the WARC of the White Reformed churches of South Africa and the third part addressed the guilt of racism in the ranks of all the member churches of the World Alliance.<sup>117</sup> With regard to the WARC declaration on racism and South Africa, Smit notes that although the sin of racism occurred universally, the situation in South Africa “at the present time” demanded “special attention”, especially because of the role of the White Reformed churches as they developed both the policy and the theological and moral justification of that policy in detail over many years. However, the separation of the Reformed churches in South Africa on the basis of race and colour was being defended by some “as a faithful interpretation of the will of God and of the Reformed understanding of the church in the world”. This led to the separation of Christians at the table of the Lord’s Supper as a matter of practice and policy, says Smit.<sup>118</sup>

It can be said that all these divisions and white domination over other racial groups had serious implications for church and society. Where does this put the ethical reflection of the church and its unity, its public witness and service in the world? Does church division, especially on racial grounds, have any moral teaching to the world that is crying out for renewal? The contest of the Reformed churches against apartheid and racism in South Africa was an evident witness of the church’s advocacy to issues of justice, peace and reconciliation in the world. It can further be said that the Reformed churches in a way tried to keep the connection between ecclesiology and ethics, between what the church is and what the church does.

Russel Botman states that together with his classmates at UWC, they came to the conclusion that “apartheid is a crime against humanity”, politically “apartheid is undemocratic”, and

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<sup>117</sup> See Smit, What does Status Confessionis mean? 1984, 14-15.

<sup>118</sup> See Smit, What does Status Confessionis mean? 1984, 15.



economically “apartheid is an exploitation of human and natural resources.”<sup>119</sup> Jaap Durand writes remarkably in his book, titled *Jaap Durand praat oor eenheid, versoening en geregtigheid*, about his road to Belhar and the discussion of his final year students’ class on reconciliation in their discussion, which paved the way to the formulation of the Belhar Confession. These final year students – amongst them were the likes of Russel Botman and Leonardo Appies – who viewed apartheid as an ethical challenge and is against social justice. This message was formulated and carried to the Dutch Reformed Mission Church Synod that sat at Belhar in 1982.<sup>120</sup> It can be added that apartheid is not just a crime against humanity and nature, but also against God of all creation.

The DRMC at its Synod in Belhar on the 1<sup>st</sup> of October 1982 debated a resolution on the matter, especially with regard to racism resolution during the WARC meeting in Ottawa in August 1982. The DRMC decided:

Because the secular gospel of apartheid most fundamentally threatens the reconciliation in Jesus Christ and the very essence of the unity of the church of Jesus Christ, the DRMC declares that it constitutes a *status confessionis* for the church of Jesus Christ. The DRMC affirmed that apartheid contradicts the very nature of the church and denounced apartheid “separate development” as a heresy.<sup>121</sup>

I must underline that even other sister churches of the Dutch Reformed Church such as the Reformed Church in Africa denounced the theological justification of apartheid by the DRC as unscriptural and unchristian just after the WARC decision in 1982. The Reformed Church in Africa Synod refrained from labelling apartheid as a heresy.<sup>122</sup> It must be noted that although the RCA refrained from labelling apartheid as a heresy, what is significant for this church as with the DRMC is that the theological justification of apartheid was rejected in any form.

For Smit, the expression “*status confessionis*” could mean that a Christian, a group of Christians, a church, or a group of churches are of the opinion that a situation has

<sup>119</sup> See Botman, *Barmen to Belhar*, 2006, 240.

<sup>120</sup> See J. Durand, 2014. *Jaap Durand praat oor eenheid, versoening en geregtigheid*: in Danie du Toit (ed.), Bybelkor, Wellington, 2014, 3-39.

<sup>121</sup> See *Agenda en Handeling NGSK 1982*, 21. See also Smit, What does Status Confessionis mean? 1984, 15-16.

<sup>122</sup> See *Acts RCA 1986*, 31.

developed, a moment of truth has dawned, in which nothing less than the gospel itself, their most fundamental confession concerning the Christian gospel itself, is at stake, so that they feel compelled to witness and act over against this threat.<sup>123</sup> It is quite evident that the situation became unbearable and the church could not be silent any longer.

Smit explains that when it is judged that the gospel itself is at stake, it also means that an attitude of neutrality or nonalignment is no longer possible, or rather; having such an attitude implies that a choice has already been made.<sup>124</sup> He argues that neutrality in a state of injustice is a confirmation of an alignment with the perpetrators of the injustice itself. Smit reminds us that Bonhoeffer's statements on neutral people played an important role in Ottawa, especially with regard to the declaration of apartheid as heresy and as a sin against humanity. According to Smit, Bonhoeffer declared that there are no neutral people ... the acknowledgement of a *status confessionis* is a reminder to the church leadership that a choice must be made in this hour.<sup>125</sup> It is evident that the DRC understood this perfectly as it took a stand already to support racism in South Africa and the apartheid government. A choice was made by the DRC to stand against the justice of God where all humanity according to God's law must be treated equally. This teaches the church not to take a neutral position concerning the issues of peace, reconciliation and justice, and above all, the care for all creation.

These convictions were operating in the decisions of the DRMC, especially when considering the theological arguments of 1978 Synod and the final drafting of a confession that focuses on only three central issues with reference to the message of the Bible alone.<sup>126</sup> Adonis states that the confession was drafted by the ad hoc commission consisting of Rev. I.J. Mentor (Moderator), Dr. A.A. Boesak (Assessor), Prof. D.J. Smit, Prof. J.J.F. Durand and Prof. G. Bam (Chairperson) during the DRMC Synod of 1982, its draft was accepted by the Synod and the final draft was accepted during the 1986 Synod.<sup>127</sup> The DRMC Synod of 1986 decision reads: "Die Konsep-belydenis word aanvaar as Belydenis van die NG Sendingkerk en dit word opgeneem in die Kerkorde Art 1.1 as die Belydenis van Belhar (1986). Die Begeleidende Brief word steeds saam met die Belydenis gepubliseer."<sup>128</sup> It must be noted that even before the DRMC Synod of 1982, there were various vibrant church-based movements

<sup>123</sup> See Smit, What does Status Confessionis mean? 1984, 16.

<sup>124</sup> See Smit, What does Status Confessionis mean? 1984, 21.

<sup>125</sup> See Smit, What does Status Confessionis mean? 1984, 21-22.

<sup>126</sup> See Smit, What does Status Confessionis mean? 1984, 22.

<sup>127</sup> See Adonis, The history of Belhar: 2006, 237.

<sup>128</sup> See *Agenda en Handeling NGSK 1986*, 719.



such as *Die Broederkring*, later known as the *Belydende Kring* (Circle of Brothers) and the Christian Institute (CI), under the leadership of the controversial pastor Beyers Naudé that voiced concerns with regard to apartheid and racism in South Africa. They contributed greatly to the advocacy for social justice.

The South African Reformed theologian Mary-Anne Plaatjies-Van Huffel, in her article titled *Reading the Belhar Confession as a historical text*, underlines that the members of the Confessing Circle played an important role in the deliberations during the DRMC Synod of 1982. She states that the Confessing Circle, originally called the *Broederkring* (Circle of Brother) (BK), was constituted by Black and White clergy, evangelists, church council members and lay members of the DRMC and the DRCA. According to Plaatjies-Van Huffel the Confessing Circle had set itself the goal of guiding and pressuring the church in the struggle against apartheid and towards attaining church unity, especially affecting debates on Synodical level with regard to social justice issues.<sup>129</sup> It is evident in this regard that even though the DRMC was concerned about church unity, the question of God's justice was also taken seriously.

The purpose and the relevance of the Belhar Confession of the DRMC<sup>130</sup> was then a crucial one for the situation in South Africa. The DRMC decided not to be mute or neutral with regard to the situation of South Africa; a choice was made to speak truth to power as many innocent people suffered injustices every hour. Through the message of the Belhar Confession the DRMC emphasised its calling and purpose in the world. For this reason, the churches in South Africa became aware that church and ethics cannot be disconnected from each other. The churches needed to play a decisive role in response to the South African situation in which they find themselves.

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<sup>129</sup> See M. Plaatjies-Van Huffel, 2013. Reading the Belhar Confession as a historical text, in: Mary-Anne Plaatjies-Van Huffel and Robert Vosloo (eds.), *Reformed Churches in South Africa and the Struggle for Justice: Remembering 1960-1990*, SUN MeDIA, Stellenbosch, 2013, 331. Plaatjies-Van Huffel also gives a full analysis of the Belhar Confession's historical overview, especially with regard to the time frame in which Belhar was written, the geographical and historical location, the authorship and the audience of the confession. 2013, 329-345. See also N. Botha, 2013. The Voice of Protest within the Dutch Reformed Mission Church: 1976-1986, in: Mary-Anne Plaatjies-Van Huffel and Robert Vosloo (eds.), *Reformed Churches in South Africa and the Struggle For Justice: Remembering 1960-1990*, SUN MeDIA, Stellenbosch, 2013, 75-91. Nico Botha writes remarkably about the role of the DRMC in the struggle for justice, especially the role played by Allan Boesak as "organic" intellectual, the emergence of the Belhar Confession, the role of lecturers of theology such as, Bernard Lategan, Daan Cloete, Jaap Durand, Dirkie Smit, Gustav Bam to mention but a few, and the role of movements such as the *Belydende Kring*.

<sup>130</sup> The Belhar Confession of the previously DRMC is now a confession of the new church, namely, the Uniting Reformed Church in Southern Africa (URCSA). The DRCA and the DRMC united on the 14 April 1994 to form the so-called URCSA.

### 6.3. The purpose of the confession

The situation in South Africa thus led the church to declare a *status confessionis*. Piet Naudé states that there is no doubt that Belhar was both historically and theologically the result of a *status confessionis*. Naudé argues that this means that Christians or the church feel that a moment of truth has arrived in which the gospel itself is at stake.<sup>131</sup> The Accompanying letter of the Belhar Confession explains the purpose of this confession very clearly. Although the nature of the specific historical moment gives rise to Reformed confession the only reason for confessing is to be found in the Gospel of Jesus Christ. Johan Botha and Piet Naudé refers to the opening words of the accompanying letter of the Belhar Confession, where the church states this in the first paragraph, and continues: “We are deeply conscious that moments of such seriousness can arise in the life of the church that it may feel the need to confess its faith anew in the light of a specific situation.”<sup>132</sup>

The accompanying letter further declares:

We make this confession not as a contribution to a theological debate, nor as a new summary of our beliefs, but as a cry from the heart, as something we are obliged to do for the sake of the Gospel in view of the times in which we stand... This confession is not aimed at specific people or groups of people or a church or churches. The church confesses against a false doctrine, against an ideological distortion that threatens the gospel itself in our church and in our country. Therefore this confession must be seen as a call to a continuous process of soul-searching together, a joint wrestling with issues, and a readiness to repent in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ in a broken world.... On this road we shall unavoidably suffer intense growing pains while we struggle to conquer alienation, bitterness, irreconciliation and fear. We shall have to come to know and encounter both ourselves and others in new ways. We are only too well aware that this confession

<sup>131</sup> See Naudé, *Neither Calendar nor Clock*: 2010, 91.

<sup>132</sup> See J. Botha and P. Naudé, 2011. *Good News to Confess: The Belhar Confession and the road of acceptance*, Bible Media, Wellington, 2011, 23. See also Piet Naudé 2010, *Neither Calendar nor Clock*: 2010, 91. Naudé further states that in our judgment the present church and political situation call for such a decision. For him the situation today in South Africa to be specific calls for the church to confess its faith anew. There is much to be done by the church with regard to the situation today as it has done in the past. For further informative history on the formulation and purpose of the Belhar Confession, read D. J. Smit, 2007. No Other Motives Would Give Us Right: Reflections on contextuality from a Reformed Experience – in *Essays in Public Theology, Collected Essays I*, Study Guides in Religion and Theology 12, Ernst M. Conradie (ed.), SUN Press, 2007, 157- 178.

calls for the dismantling of structures of thought, of church, and of society that have developed over many years.<sup>133</sup>

The accompanying letter opens up the heart of the church, its nature and calling. It also reveals the position of the church in a time where the message of the gospel is at stake and reflecting on how the church must react against injustice. The Belhar Confession calls for both the unity of the church and the role of the church in the world. Belhar seem to ask how we dare speak of church unity in a racially divided church and South African society. How dare we speak of reconciliation and justice, whilst many people do not have access to basic needs?

The churches in South Africa have been struggling to fight against racism, apartheid and many other injustices. This was also a long struggle for church unity until the reaching closer to God's dream of unity on the 14<sup>th</sup> of April 1994, when the Dutch Reformed Church in Africa (DRCA) and Dutch Reformed Mission Church (DRMC) united for the first time, and the Uniting Reformed Church in Southern Africa (URCSA) was born just 13 days before the national elections for a democratic South Africa.<sup>134</sup> The unity of these churches marks the first step towards reaching God's dream and fulfilment of the prayer of Jesus Christ for unity. Church unity is one of the contents of the Belhar Confession. An act of confession may only be made by the church for the sake of its purity and credibility and that of its message. According to Smit's article on Belhar, *No other motives would give us the right*, the confession is not intended to serve the interests of some, and accordingly, is also not aimed as a weapon to be used against others, as the synod explicitly said.<sup>135</sup> Daan Cloete and Dirkie Smit made a very clear distinction between the way the church speaks to the state and the way it addresses itself as church. Furthermore, it is clear that Cloete and Smit stood much closer to Barmen than the other interpretations presented to the Synod.

Throughout the churches' struggle against apartheid, the similarities between South Africa and Nazi Germany have been pointed out. Smit exclusively claims that the Belhar Confession is the product of a conversation with the Barmen Declaration. He strongly argues that without Barmen there would have been no Belhar in its present form. Smit underlines that Belhar was

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<sup>133</sup> See Botha and Naudé, *Good News to Confess*: 2011, 23-25. See also Smit, What does Status Confessionis mean? 1984, 25.

<sup>134</sup> See *Agenda en Handeling VGKSA 1997*, 26,504.

<sup>135</sup> See Smit, *No Other Motives Would Give Us the Right*: 2007,162.

born in a long, intense struggle with Barmen – with its own historical context, its insights and contributions, the theologies, theologians and church movements informing and inspiring it, the evangelical claims expressed in it, and its own ambiguous history of reception during the decades to follow, in Germany and far outside its birth-place.<sup>136</sup>

In South Africa, the political implications are especially striking because of the fact that apartheid as a political system had as its theological offspring a heresy. The confession itself is much more explicit than Barmen and addresses the specific problems of South Africa much more openly than Barmen's implicit references to the Jewish question. Jaap Durand states that publishing a confession of faith is not a common event. It is, in fact, very uncommon, he says. Durand says the reason for this is not hard to find and confessions have always been controversial documents in the history of the church. In his opinion, the serious differences of opinion they elicited related not only to the confessions as such, but also to their inception.<sup>137</sup> Initially, Durand seems to be hesitant of the need of a confession against government policy.

Durand further argues that a confession does not emerge from a situation in which church and state are engaged in conflict. He further states that in such a situation the church will indeed confess its faith, obedient even unto death, but will not publish a confession against a government policy or political philosophy as such. Durand sees the necessity for the Belhar Confession when he states that apartheid in South Africa is much more than a political system imposed on South African society through many years of legislation. It is a comprehensive ideology and view of life involving the organisation and control of human beings and society with the pretense of a pseudogospel; the solution of social problems through – in this instances - the legal separation of groups and individuals on the basis of race and colour.<sup>138</sup> Within this context, the Belhar Confession addresses the need for unity, reconciliation and justice in society and the rest of the world on biblical conditions and pleads with churches to embody these.

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<sup>136</sup> See Smit, Barmen and Belhar in Conversation: 2006, 291. Botman agrees to the symbolic congruence between Barmen and Belhar, but he notes that they also differ in many ways yet they both became symbols of liberation in two different contexts where Christians respond to a *status confessionis*. For the differences, see H.R. Botman, Barmen to Belhar, 2006, 241-242.

<sup>137</sup> See J.J.F. Durand, 1984. "A Confession: Was It Really Necessary?" In: *A Moment of Truth: The Confession of the Dutch Reformed Mission Church 1982*. William B. Eerdmans, Michigan. 1984, 33.

<sup>138</sup> See Durand, A Confession: 1984, 36.

#### 6.4. The structure and the contents of the confession

The structure of the Belhar Confession is straightforward. It is comprised of a short preface in which the church confesses its faith in the triune God who gathers and cares for the church through God's Word and Spirit, the three articles of faith on embodied unity, true reconciliation and compassionate justice, and it ends with a conclusion in which the church confesses that it owes obedience to Jesus Christ even in the face of resistance.<sup>139</sup> The main contents of the Belhar Confession are unity, reconciliation and justice. These three significant contents of the Belhar Confession will be discussed in detail in the next chapter.

The Belhar Confession's first article states: "We believe in one holy, universal Christian church, the communion of saints called from the entire human family."<sup>140</sup> The confession strongly emphasises that church unity should be the one that Jesus Christ himself prayed for in John 17:21. This prayer of Jesus Christ is also a founding dream for the unity of the church. It is indeed God's dream for His church to be one, not just in spirit, but also in a functional and visible way in the world. Durand notes that the Belhar Confession opposes heresy and clearly shows in its three articles why it is heresy: Firstly, it causes a rift in the church on the grounds of race and colour, grounds that advance something more than just faith in Jesus Christ as the basis on the church's existence. Secondly, it violates the evangelical message of reconciliation between human being and human being, rendering that reconciliation is impossible in everyday life. Finally, it is in opposition of the Biblical message of divine justice, it opens the door to the exploitation of the powerless by the powerful, Durand says.<sup>141</sup>

Church division on the basis of race, colour and many other factors impacts negatively in the life of the church itself and in society as it advances inequality amongst humanity. It must be noted that the Belhar Confession contends for unity that transforms all the structures of injustices, and inequality. The confession seeks to bring the church and society to reconciliation where justice prevails. Durand highlights that the authors of the confession wanted in this way to underline the fact that it concerns itself in the first place with the heretical church doctrine that underlies the entire apartheid system.<sup>142</sup> Unity, reconciliation

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<sup>139</sup> See J. Botha, 2011. Belhar – a staff to lean on today and tomorrow: In Johan Botha and Piet Naudé, 2011. *Good News to Confess*: 2011, 67.

<sup>140</sup> See Botha and Naudé, *Good News to Confess*: 2011, 19.

<sup>141</sup> See Durand, *A Confession*: 1984, 36.

<sup>142</sup> See J.J.F. Durand, 1984. *A Confession*: 1984, 36.

and justice lie close to the heart of the Gospel. The draft of the confession makes it clear that the church is the property of God, who rules it by His Word and Spirit.

The second article of the Belhar Confession does not oppose a political system, but rather a false Gospel. The entire Belhar Confession does not mention apartheid. However, it expresses a very clear stance on any immoral and the false doctrine. The second article reads:

We believe that God has entrusted to His church the message of reconciliation in and through Jesus Christ; that the church is called to be the salt of the earth and light of the world that the church is called blessed because it is a peacemaker.<sup>143</sup>

The Belhar Confession pleads for true reconciliation that is embedded in the life of the church. The church, as a peacemaker and as reconciled with God, is called to take initiatives in making this reconciliation between God and humanity and also between fellow human beings and creation possible. In this regard the church is seen as reconciled and a reconciling community. As a peacemaker, the members of the church must reflect this peace, this reconciliation in their daily living by looking at Christ as their perfect example in this regard. The church is called by God to be an agent of reconciliation in the world. Christ's work of reconciliation is confessed as being manifested in the life of the church, in the community of believers who have been reconciled with God and with one another.

The third article of the Belhar Confession deals with the question of justice. It reads: "We believe that God has revealed Godself as the One who wishes to bring about justice and true peace on earth."<sup>144</sup> The church stands in God's position against injustice and with the wronged. It must confront the powerful and privileged who would selfishly seek only their own interests and thus control and harm others. This is the heart of Christian vocation and witness in the world. We learn from Smit that the discussion within the circles of the DR family of churches hardly had any talk of an appeal to the justice of God and its implications for the church in the South African context. It is also evident that the DRMC was aware that ecclesiology and ethics are significant in the situation in which the church finds itself and for the sake of the world.

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<sup>143</sup> See Johan Botha and Piet Naudé, 2011. *Good News to Confess*: 2011, 21.

<sup>144</sup> See Botha and Naudé, *Good News to Confess*: 2011, 22.

From this note by Smit, the importance of the need not to separate ecclesiology and ethics is affirmed. One is reminded of the ecclesiology and ethics debate of the WCC between the Faith and Order and Life and Work commissions (as discussed in chapter four of this dissertation). There was the temptation that Faith and Order would focus on ecclesiology and neglect ethics, whilst Life and Work focus on peace and justice while neglecting ecclesiological reflection. In the South African context too this tension between ecclesiology and ethics was a temptation in the separation of the work of the Church Unity Commission (CUC) and that of the South African Council of Churches (SACC). The CUC focused mainly on church unity, whilst the SACC mainly focused on social justice issues in South Africa. There were no specific interrelations between the work of the CUC on church unity and the SACC's concern on social justice that arose from the apartheid system in South Africa. The ecclesiology and ethics in the Belhar Confession brings these separate working relations together in a potentially fruitful way.

## 6.5. Conclusion

It can be concluded that – amidst difference – there are strong similarities between the Ecclesiology and Ethics discourse of the WCC and the Belhar Confession discourse on unity, reconciliation and justice. Both debates, and its history of origin and reception, seem to struggle to combine ecclesiology and ethics.

Many terrible events that took place in South Africa as a result of racism and apartheid led the church to look again at its calling and witness in the world. The moment had called the church to react to the gloomy situation in which it found itself. The churches in South Africa and the ecumenical bodies such as the World Alliance of Reformed Churches and the World Council of Churches played a significant role in standing against the injustices and the dangers caused by racism and apartheid in South Africa. By declaring a *status confessionis*, the church openly declared that all people are equal in the eyes of God and that racism and apartheid are against message of the gospel.

In formulating the Belhar Confession, the DRMC took a stance to state its conviction in a situation where it found the credibility of the gospel was at stake. It must be noted that the Belhar Confession is not a political document in protest against the government of the time; it is a church document where the church, because of the situation it found itself in, had to



confess its faith anew so that the message of the gospel could not be at stake. The significant highlight of the contest between ecclesiology and ethics within the Belhar Confession is clearly articulated in the accompanying letter. The accompanying letter further answers the core questions why Belhar was drafted, why it was necessary and whether this confession can be used beyond its own South African context as an ecclesiology and ethics debate. The message of Belhar is mainly on unity, reconciliation, and justice, and these three key issues – one can argue – were and still are extremely important for the South African context and the rest of the world.

The main challenge with regard to the Belhar Confession is that Christians and churches fail to embody the three articles of this confession. The challenging discourse with regards to the Belhar Confession presently is not merely the question of church unity; rather, it is on how justice and reconciliation can be accomplished to secure the unity we seek. In present day South Africa we wrestle with the question on whether the reconciliation process of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC) served any justice towards the victims of apartheid. The following chapter will shed some light on some of these complex questions when dealing with these three articles of the Belhar Confession. The Belhar Confession discourse on unity, reconciliation and justice has the potential to challenge the status quo and the destructive structures of the apartheid system that prevented the flow of social justice and equality in South Africa.

Moreover, the Belhar Confession emphasises the need for reconciliation amongst fellow Christians and South Africans. The confession does not condone any separation of church services, buildings and Holy Communion services on racial grounds. Belhar also emphasises the need for justice in the church and society – and contests against injustices and inequalities amongst people. Within the South African context, the following questions can further be asked: What does Belhar say to the church and society about the abuse of women and children abuse, rape, xenophobia, stigmatisation, marginalisation, racism, victimisation, sexism and many other challenges we are facing today? Can the unity of the church alone, which is expressed in the Belhar Confession, help us to deal with these challenges in the church and society?

These questions and many other relevant questions with regard to the significance of ecclesiology and ethics as articulated in the Belhar Confession will remain unanswered until



Belhar is taken seriously. This does not exclude the URCSA (as the church in which this confession originated) in embodying it. Whether this church embodies, its confession it remains a challenging question. The reunification debates amongst the DR family of churches are promising. At times, the Belhar Confession was seen as a stumbling block for unity by some members of the DRC. The next chapter discusses the theological significance of the articles of the Belhar Confession on costly unity, costly reconciliation and costly justice. The debate around the Belhar Confession is interpreted as a debate grappling with the most adequate way of relating ecclesiology and ethics.

## Chapter 7

### Belhar: Costly Unity, Costly Reconciliation, and Costly Justice

#### 7.1. Introduction

The heart of the Belhar Confession lies in its three fundamental contents or articles, namely the articles on unity, reconciliation and justice respectively. These three articles are tightly connected to each other, and they cannot be disconnected. A question can be asked as to whether unity is not a subject to address on its own and why we need to view it in conjunction with reconciliation and justice? Why is this connection so crucial between these articles? In an attempt to give an answer to these questions, it is very important to attend to the assertion that there is no unity without reconciliation and justice, and no reconciliation and justice without unity. Any unity where reconciliation and justice are absent can be disastrous. When we deal with the contents of the Belhar Confession, we are dealing with ecclesiology *and* ethics. This is one of the central claims of this dissertation. The contents of the Belhar Confession are mainly derived from the texts in the Bible where God is confessed as God of unity, reconciliation and justice. The contents of the Belhar Confession as a highly contested document attempt to address the role of church unity and the church's call to witness and service in the world, especially for the South African context after the collapse of apartheid. In this sense it shows interesting parallels with the WCC debate on Ecclesiology and Ethics that aims at linking church unity to challenges arising from social contexts.

The book by Johan Botha and Piet Naudé, titled *Good News to Confess: The Belhar Confession and the Road of Acceptance*, will be used as a guide when dealing with these three fundamental contents of the Belhar Confession, especially the chapter titled "Belhar – a staff to lean on today and tomorrow".<sup>1</sup> This book sheds light on these contents and explains

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<sup>1</sup> This book is very helpful with regard to some background and issues raised at the DRMC Synod when the Belhar Confession was drafted. The co-author of this book, Johan Botha, was present at these Synods and some of the stories told in the book give a clearer picture of what was exactly happening during the sitting of these Synods in 1982 and 1986. I fully recognise a number of other theologians and ministers that contributed to the birth of the Belhar Confession, some of whom published a number of articles and books on the Belhar Confession. A lot of research has been done on the Belhar Confession by a number of ministers, theologians and researchers. Amongst theologians and ministers who published fundamental articles and books on the Belhar Confession are Dirkie Smit, Russel Botman, Piet Naudé, Nico Koopman, Johan Botha, Jaap Durand, Robert Vosloo, and Mary-Anne Plaatjies-Van Huffel, to mention but a few. Some of their fundamental work will be employed in this chapter. However, it must be noted that a number of other theologians and ministers also published some articles in oppositional response to the Belhar Confession and its necessity. For some voices

what it meant for the church in the past. The article of Dirkie Smit, titled “In a special way the God of the destitute, the poor and the wronged” in *A Moment of Truth: The Confession of the Dutch Reformed Mission Church 1982*, will also be helpful in this regard. The Belhar Confession cannot be analysed and interpreted properly without looking at the picture in which this confession was formulated, as well as by looking at the context in which we live today. The previous chapter highlighted the context in which this confession was born. It can be said that without the apartheid system in South Africa, especially being legitimised by the church, there would have been no Belhar Confession today.

This chapter will mainly discuss what the Belhar Confession says about costly unity, costly reconciliation and costly justice in an attempt to understand what it means to us as the church today and for the future. This will also be followed by a brief discussion of the Belhar Confession reception in the DRC and also by other Reformed churches abroad. Although the Belhar Confession is a highly contested church document, the impact of its debate on ecclesiology and ethics touched the hearts of many Christians within the DRC and other churches locally and globally. Many churches could relate their present contextual situations with the message that Belhar brings across on church unity, reconciliation and justice.

## **7.2. Costly Unity?**

Without doubt, the unity of the church is costly. The Ecclesiology and Ethics debate together with the Belhar Confession debate affirms that church unity is not cheap; it is very costly. The unity of the church, which is totally united with its head, Jesus Christ the Son of God, came with a high price, so that we as his church can be united with the Father through the Holy Spirit. The question mark on costly unity is an attempt to enquire why unity is costly. How costly is this unity? Perhaps at what value is this unity important? Is church unity really necessary? How can we feel safe and at home best as strangers in this unity we seek? What is the nature of this costly unity? What will church unity contribute to the broken human community and the rest of the world? What does this church unity entail? Who benefits from this costly unity? Can there be any unity, tangible unity within the circles of the Dutch Reformed family of churches after a long period of disunity, inequality and mistrust? What is the significance of church unity in social contexts?

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opposing Belhar, read the recent publication on the discourse around the Belhar Confession, namely: “*Belhar Geweeg*” 2012, Piet Theron (ed.), Kraal, Pretoria.

The Belhar Confession shed some light on and provided answers to these fundamental questions with regard to the significance and the necessity of church unity. Under “Costly unity”, the following headings will be used: “We believe in one, holy, universal Christian Church”, “This unity is both a gift and an obligation”, “This unity must become visible so that the world may believe”, and “Belhar and the DR family of churches”.

### 7.2.1. We believe in one, holy, universal Christian Church

Belhar starts by confessing the unity between the Father, Son and the Holy Spirit, who through the Word and Spirit brings together, protects and cares for Christ’s church. The first content of the Belhar Confession can be linked to this unity between the Father, Son and the Holy Spirit. The first content of the confession says: “We believe in one, holy, universal Christian church, the communion of saints called from the entire human family.”<sup>2</sup> This confession of the one, holy universal church in Belhar is in line with other Reformed confessions such as the Heidelberg Catechism. Botha notes that the Heidelberg Catechism underlines this unity of the faithful as it teaches in Questions and Answers 54 and 55, that we are called to use our gifts for the well-being and benefit of one another. Botha further states that as a universal Christian church, together in the church, we are given the opportunity to mutually serve and enrich one another with our variety of gifts, opportunities, backgrounds, convictions, languages and cultures, and that we do this from within the one visible family of God, within the Household of God.<sup>3</sup>

### 7.2.2. This unity is both a gift and an obligation

Botha states that the unity we confess, which is both a gift and commission from God, must be pursued.<sup>4</sup> Christians at times forget that the unity of the church is not about us and our

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<sup>2</sup> See J. Botha and P. Naudé, 2011. “Belhar – a staff to lean on today and tomorrow”: in Johan Botha and Piet Naudé: *Good News to Confess: The Belhar Confession and the road of acceptance*, Bible Media, Wellington, 2011, 69. The expression confessed here for the one holy, universal Christian church, the communion of saints called from the entire human family has been the greatest challenge of the church for decades. There were different views with regard to the unity of the triune God, the person of Christ, the doctrines about salvation and many other views that led to church division. Johan Botha and Piet Naudé give a brief background on these important debates about confessions. They give a short background on the first period of confessing: Councils, creeds and symbols of the early church; the second period of confessing was that of confessions during the Reformation period and the beginning of the third period of confessing was that of Barmen Declaration, which also influenced the birth of the Belhar Confession. See J. Botha and P. Naudé, 2011. Jesus is Lord: in Johan Botha and Piet Naudé: *Good News to Confess*: 2011, 27-42.

<sup>3</sup> See Botha and Naudé, Belhar – a staff to lean on today and tomorrow: 2011, 69.

<sup>4</sup> See Botha and Naudé, 2011. Belhar – a staff to lean on today and tomorrow: 2011, 69.

choices, but it is God's dream and wish for us as God's church to be one. According to Botha and Naudé, the Belhar Confession states this clearly when it says:

That unity is, therefore, both a gift and an obligation for the church of Jesus Christ; that through the working of God's Spirit it is a binding force, yet simultaneously a reality which must be earnestly pursued and sought; one which the people of God must continually be built up to attain.<sup>5</sup>

This clearly shows why church unity is so important and necessary. The church has no choice but to unite, and this unity is a gift from God. Dirkie Smit emphasises this point clearly when he writes that the unity of the church is not created by us, but we confess it, it does not depend on us, we cannot even choose to be united or not. But we receive one another as brothers and sisters in Christ; we cannot choose or reject each other.<sup>6</sup>

For Smit church unity is simple and straightforward. He insightfully highlights three key important things to substantiate his argument. He points out that in association with the Bible, with the ecumenical creeds of the early church and also on the 16<sup>th</sup> century confessional writings, the unity of the church is confessed as a gift. Firstly, Smit argues that according to the Belhar Confession the church is already one. Secondly, the Belhar Confession confesses that this gift of unity is an obligation and must be visible, and lastly, is the confession on how this unity must be made visible.<sup>7</sup> In line with the Belhar Confession, Smit states that through the reconciling work of Christ and the power of the fellowship of the Holy Spirit, the church is one as a gift. It must be noted that the Belhar Confession rejects any form of disunity and racial segregation. In fact, the Belhar Confession rejects the white racial domination and the idea of White Christians who referred to themselves as the chosen nation of God. The Belhar Confession explicitly gives a new meaning and vision on church unity, as compared to the DRC's conviction of who the church is.

There was and perhaps still is a strong resistance from the DRC against church unity for various reasons, but amongst other reasons could be the challenge of equality with Black Christians, as this is a strong requirement when we speak of unity. When we speak of equality of believers in our debates about church unity, it is exactly this point where we can declare that church unity becomes costly. In relation to this challenge of equality, Smit points

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<sup>5</sup> See Botha and Naudé, *The Belhar Confession* (1986): 2011, 19.

<sup>6</sup> See D.J. Smit, 2012. „Oor die Teologiese inhoud van die Belydenis van Belhar“: *Acta Theologica*, Jaargang 32, Desember, 2012, 191.

<sup>7</sup> See Smit, *Oor die Teologiese inhoud van die Belydenis van Belhar*: 2012, 190-192.

out that the idea of apartheid ideology approved and stabilised relations and structures in society which were unjust, humiliating, degrading of humanity and often oppressive. Smit states that from the Black experience, the moral and theological justification of the apartheid is nothing more than the strategy to defend an unrighteous society on Christian or Biblical grounds.<sup>8</sup> It therefore becomes evident that the roots of apartheid were very deep and entrenched in society. The gap of inequality became wider by each day and the possibilities for church unity and reconciliation seemed to be impossible. I want to underline that anything that is structurally based, such as apartheid, is very difficult to break down easily. From generation to generation, the influential teaching of apartheid and inequality was maintained within the White family structures and in the church.<sup>9</sup> This made things impossible for church unity and the apartheid system itself threatened the life of the church and society. In a way, it created an atmosphere of animosity and tension between different racial groups in South Africa. This requires what Jaap Durand calls radical transformation from the root. Durand states that if we change from the root, in the heart, your whole life changes. For him this is what the Bible calls repentance.<sup>10</sup> This points to the challenge of the church in transforming church and social structures, but this has to start with the heart of an individual in embodying the unity we seek in order for the world to see that reconciliation and justice is the heart of the calling of the church.

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<sup>8</sup> See D. J. Smit, 1984. "In a Special Way the God of the Destitute, the Poor and the Wronged" In: *A Moment of Truth: The Confession of the Dutch Reformed Mission Church 1982*. William B. Eerdmans, Michigan, 1984, 53. Under this theme Smit underscores third article of the Belhar Confession on compassionate justice of God. Throughout this topic he also expresses the connection between the three articles of the Confession of Belhar without separating them.

<sup>9</sup> In substantiating this statement, the move of theological training of the Uniting Reformed Church in Southern Africa ministers from the University of the Western Cape – better known as Bush and its Theological Faculty as (*Tokkies*) was an eye opener for many of us with regard to apartheid's influence in younger generation. In a class of 2001 Master of Divinity during the time of URCSA, students like Rodney Tshaka, Mxolisi Stuurman, Gavin Cloete, Freddie Steenkamp, Christopher Maarnan and many others including the Dutch Reformed Church students were asked to draw a list of church stereotypes. The URCSA students were asked to draw the list of the DRC stereotypes and the DRC to draw the URCSA stereotypes. The lists were then presented by each group in the class. Amongst other things mentioned in the list by DRC students about the URCSA were very provocative and very ugly statements; amongst other things mentioned, really out of proportion accusations were made where it was mentioned that the URCSA people are slaves, they are dying of HIV/Aids, and they are unclean, to mention but a few. However, one DRC student concluded by mentioning that he never regarded himself being lectured by a Coloured professor as he was taught at home that Coloured people are from a lower class of people and they are slaves. The URCSA students also mentioned that the DRC are racist and they are not considerate towards other people. This alone shows exactly on how some of the White children were raised by their parents and how they were taught in drawing the lines between different races in South Africa. We may not understand the danger caused by this influence and teaching for now, but the outcomes of the anger of this disillusionment will blow in the faces of many parents very soon. It could be the same with Black families, but the difference is that the children are taught on how their parents suffered from the apartheid system. Of course this raised some tensions and awareness of the deliberate inequalities between Black and White people.

<sup>10</sup> See J. Durand, 2014. *Jaap Durand praat oor eenheid, versoening en geregtigheid*: in Danie du Toit (ed.), Bybelkor, Wellington, 2014, 51-52.

### 7.2.3. This unity must become visible so that the world may believe

In the Belhar Confession, this one, holy, universal Christian church from the entire human family that embraces diversity, the church that received the gift of unity from God as a challenge and as an obligation, is called to live this unity in a visible way. As the Belhar Confession puts it:

This unity must become visible so that the world may believe that separation, enmity and hatred between people and groups is sin which Christ has already conquered, and accordingly that anything which threatens this unity may have no place in the church and must be resisted.<sup>11</sup>

The challenge for visible and practical unity that Belhar proposes is very crucial for the DR family of churches in the endeavour for church unity today. The Belhar Confession also emphasises the significant point that this visible unity must send a special message to the world out there to know and believe that separation on racial grounds and hatred between people is sin. This is in line with *Church and World*, especially with reference to the search for justice and the search for an authentic community of women and men (as discussed in chapter two). This visible unity of a Christian community according to Belhar must be embraced and expressed in the form of *koinonia* in faith, life and witness as proposed in chapter three of this study. The Belhar Confession also rejects the reality of the divisions referred to in chapter five of this study, and contends for church unity that will play a significant role in social contexts.

Moreover, the Belhar Confession reminds us that this visible unity has implications. Church unity should be visible and practical. The confession spells out the implications of this unity in church and society in the following way:

That this unity of the people of God must be manifested and be active in a variety of ways: in that we love another; that we experience, practice and pursue community with one another; that we are obligated to give ourselves willingly and joyfully to be of benefit and blessing to one another; that we share one faith, have one calling, are of one soul and one mind; have one God and Father, are filled with one Spirit, are baptised with one baptism, eat of one bread and drink of one cup, confess one Name, are obedient to one Lord, work for one cause and

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<sup>11</sup> See Botha and Naudé, *The Belhar Confession* (1986): 2011, 19.

share one hope....that we suffer with one another for the sake of righteousness, pray together, together serve God in this world; and together fight against everything that may threaten or hinder this unity.<sup>12</sup>

These are costly unity implications in which the church has no choice but to embody. To embody church unity and diversity is always the biggest challenge. In the case of the DR family of churches these implications pose even a stronger challenge and calls for a radical transformation and repentance.

Smit challenges us in this regard, when he states that for those who believe in visible unity, the challenge remains on how to get some form of clarity on the nature of the unity they seek, its vision, model, and form of this visible unity is controversial, even for those who agree to be called to this unity. Smit refers to the Belhar Confession's framework in response to the nature of the visible unity we seek, especially the belief in the one, holy, universal church and conviction that the unity of God's people must be manifested and be active in a variety of ways.<sup>13</sup>

Smit remarks that Christians within the DR family of churches will encounter difficulties on the road towards church unity. But it should be sought because it is a matter of faith:

Dit mag lyk na 'n lang ompad, maar persoonlik dink ek dis hier waar ons moet begin in ons gespreke oor Kerkeenheid. Dit is ons grootste probleem rondom Kerkeenheid vandag. Kerkeenhied is nie 'n saak waarvoor Christene kan stry en debateer nie. Dit is 'n geloofsaak, dis vanselfsprekend.<sup>14</sup>

Smit further underlines that the road we take to church reunification is a difficult one and pleads: "Gelowiges sal eers moet leer glo in Kerkeenheid, leer droom van Kerkeenheid, leer verlang na Kerkeenheid, leer bid om Kerkeenheid."<sup>15</sup>

It becomes evident that church unity is very costly and it involves obedience to God and to each other. Smit highlights that we have a role to play in the process of costly unity. This also

<sup>12</sup> See Botha and Naudé, *The Belhar Confession* (1986): 2011, 20.

<sup>13</sup> See D.J. Smit, 2007. "Unity in church and society? Theological reflections on an ongoing challenge in South Africa today" - In: *Essays in Public Theology, Collected Essays I*, Study Guides in Religion and Theology 12, Ernst M. Conradie (ed.), SUN Press, 2007, 282-283.

<sup>14</sup> See D.J. Smit, 1991. *Gedagtes Rondom Kerkeenheid. Polumnia*, 1991. 16.

<sup>15</sup> See Smit, *Gedagtes Rondom Kerkeenheid. Polumnia*, 1991. 17.



highlights the fact that in order to achieve true church unity, we are obliged to make peace with one another, irrespective of our terrible past. This is the most difficult challenge that Christians are facing today. Nico Koopman provides us with insightful and hopeful steps towards this challenge when he argues that where people from diverse and antagonistic backgrounds live in closer proximity, where they are exposed more to each other, sharing in each other's daily plights, joys and sorrows, they start to develop sympathy, empathy and interpathy. In explanation of these terms, Koopman refers us to the following definition of David Augsberger:

Sympathy is a spontaneous affective reaction to another's feelings experienced on the basis of perceived similarity between the observer and the observed. Empathy is an intentional affective response to another's feelings experienced on the basis of perceived differences between the observer and the observed. Interpathy is an intentional cognitive and affective envisioning of another's thoughts and feelings from another culture, worldview and epistemology.<sup>16</sup>

This definition also bring us closer to the fact that the cost of the unity we seek has been paid already by Jesus Christ on the cross and that in memory of this event, we celebrate this unity in diversity in the Table of the Holy Communion where we share our joys and sorrows, and where sympathy, empathy and interpathy are fully enriched.

#### 7.2.4. Belhar and the DR family of churches

The Belhar Confession is a possible powerful source to be used by the DR family of churches in the endeavours for church unity. In fact, after a long struggle with issues of racism and apartheid in the church, Belhar shed some light on how the Christians of this family should live out their unity and also how it can be expressed in the world. For many reasons, the church was and is still exposed to schisms that dent the credible witness and service of the church in the world.

The following questions could be asked: How can this unity be achieved after a long history of separation? How fragile will this unity be, especially with regard to the baggage of the past? Can the unity of the DR family of churches be helpful towards the deeply divided South African society? What role can these churches play within the process of healing the wounds

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<sup>16</sup> See N. Koopman, 2007. Reconciliation and the Confession of Belhar (1986): Some challenges for the Uniting Reformed Church in Southern Africa, *NGTT, Dutch Reformed Theological Journal*, Deel 48, Nommers 1&2 Maart & Junie, Stellenbosch, 2007, 99.

of the past and bringing the people together in the unity of the rainbow nation? Can their unity be trusted and serve the best for church and society? With the stigma of the past and the damage caused by the apartheid system towards the church and society, can the church be trusted in forming morally good citizens and morally society? Looking at these questions, we can conclude that the challenge towards the unity we seek is very costly. Again, this church unity of course calls for the church's social engagement. This implies that the church must also deal with socio-ethical challenges that threaten its own life and that of society. In the process towards fuller communion of the DR family of churches there is a lot of pain to be experienced with regard to embracing unity in diversity and also in achieving true reconciliation. The largest struggle will be on how to keep this unity visible and on how to transform the existing structures of these family churches.

Amongst other things, the spirit of acceptance, real reconciliation, openness, willingness and confession of guilt from all those who belong to these churches could play a fundamental role towards visible church unity. The division of these churches played a very destructive role in South African society, as it was structured in the same way the DR family of churches were structured. The same people who used to worship together in church services became alienated from each other and became strong enemies in society.

Costly unity in the Belhar Confession addresses and challenges exactly what Smit points out when he states that in South Africa only one type of racist society exists – one that legally establishes and promotes inequality, unrighteousness, and discrimination in many ways.<sup>17</sup> For many Black people, and rightly so, apartheid was oppressive and did not meet the needs of Black people. For Smit, the lack of visible and active unity inside the DR family of churches is a direct obstruction in the way of combating injustice. The split of the DR family of churches' congregations on racial lines in its real form largely accomplishes the total separation within the church of groups with differing economic standards, unequal degrees of privilege, and racial differences in education, training, and skills, as well as in the degree of participation, influence and power in society.<sup>18</sup>

Koopman, with reference to Dirkie Smit, states that this disunity helps the churches to realise and faithfully confess that their ongoing split hinders the quest for the justice of God.

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<sup>17</sup> See Smit, "In a Special Way": 1984, 54.

<sup>18</sup> See Smit, "In a Special Way": 1984, 54.

Koopman further notes that disunity constitutes the perpetuation of classism and the refusal to be involved with the less privileged brothers and sisters.<sup>19</sup> This is exactly what the Belhar Confession is addressing. The Belhar Confession also rejects any doctrine that professes that this spiritual unity is truly being maintained in the bond of peace, whilst believers of the same confession are in effect alienated from one another for the sake of diversity and in despair of reconciliation.<sup>20</sup> Botha argues that as much as there are people who refuse the unity of the church, we cannot enforce this unity; it should freely come to life and all that is required for membership of the church is that one truly believes in Christ.<sup>21</sup>

Another set of questions could be asked: Can unity be possible with all the challenges of globalisation that forces people to be more individualistic in their fellowship with one another? Is church unity really a subject to worry about today as reformed Christians? What impact and social and economic changes will church unity bring to the churches and society? Can church unity serve a better role in our societies in terms of bringing people together to share one vision, one hope for the renewal of their societies? Why do we need unity? These are complex questions that defy easy answers.

Naudé helps us to understand this unity in terms of the relationship between the knowledge of self and the knowledge of God. He argues that this knowledge of God and self is only possible in Christ who reveals God to us. Referring to John Calvin's view, Naudé writes: "In Christ we are no longer our own, because we are known by God and belong to him; we are called to lives of self-denial, searching for justice in our relations with others."<sup>22</sup> This knowledge of God and self makes human beings understand the significance of the unity in Christ and with one another, and that such unity has social significance and implications. The unity in Christ propels us to live in reconciliation with each other and to serve and practice justice towards each other. Naudé argues that those who are in Christ are called into the community of believers. For him, the church as communal embodiment of faith plays a

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<sup>19</sup> See N. Koopman, 2002. "...in a special way the God of the destitute, the poor and the wronged ..." – a basic and neglected conviction of (Reformed) Theology? In Pieter Coertzen (red): *350 Jaar Gereformeerde 1652-2002*. CLF, Bloemfontein, 2002, 257.

<sup>20</sup> See Botha and Naudé, *The Belhar Confession* (1986): 2011, 20. See also Botha, *Belhar – a staff to lean on today and tomorrow*: 2011, 69-70.

<sup>21</sup> See Botha, *Belhar – a staff to lean on today and tomorrow*: 2011, 69. The Belhar Confession states it clearly that this unity can be established only in freedom and not under constraint; and that the variety of spiritual gifts, opportunities, backgrounds, convictions, as well as the diversity of languages and cultures are by virtue of the reconciliation in Christ. See Botha and Naudé, *Good News to Confess*: 2011, 20.

<sup>22</sup> See P. Naudé, 2010. *Neither Calendar nor Clock: Perspectives on the Belhar Confession*, William B. Eerdmans, Michigan, 2010, 176.

fundamental role in our reflections on what it means to be human and what kind of community we should strive for.<sup>23</sup> Here, the church has a vast challenge to accomplish and this task is not easy without God's intervention and the unity of believers.

Costly unity calls the DR family of churches to look at what the Belhar Confession says about the cost of unity given their present positions and experiences. Church unity is costly because Jesus Christ died on our behalf to break down the dividing wall of separation between us and God and between us as human beings. Through his death, he brought us together in unity and taught us to celebrate our diversity just like his disciples who were enriched by their diversity, even at the Lord's Table. Archbishop Desmond Tutu observes that diversity undergirds and leads to unity and interdependence; with the different limbs of the body each needing the others in order to live fully for the good of the whole. Tutu emphasises that no part of the body is self-sufficient. God has created us unable to do everything of ourselves, so that we must depend on others in order to become fully human.<sup>24</sup> This idea of embracing diversity that leads to unity and interdependence embraces the *koinonia* in faith, in life and witness discussion of the WCC at Santiago consultation (as discussed in chapter three of this dissertation). Santiago argued that embracing *koinonia* in faith, life, and witness leads to fuller communion of diversity and interdependence. Unity is costly because the church has to show it in practice to the divided and wounded world. Costly unity requires an ecclesiology that takes issues of justice and reconciliation seriously, as they are life and death issues. Tutu further points out that apartheid declare that human beings are fundamentally irreconcilable, and for him this is one of the most significant facts about us.<sup>25</sup> The unity of the DR family of churches can arguably still play an important and decisive role in the life of the church itself and in society.

### 7.3. Costly Reconciliation?

The Ecclesiology and Ethics debate observes that Christians and churches must engage themselves to a *Costly Commitment* towards *Costly Reconciliation* with God and with each other. In a situation of division and inequalities, in order to unite the churches, societies and

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<sup>23</sup> See Naudé, *Neither Calendar nor Clock*: 2010, 177.

<sup>24</sup> See D. Tutu, 1983, Christianity and apartheid. In: *Apartheid is a heresy*: in John W. De Gruchy & Charles Villa-Vicencio (eds.), David Philip, Cape Town, 1983, 43.

<sup>25</sup> See Tutu, Christianity and apartheid. 1983, 43-44.

people there is a need for reconciliation and repentance. The second significant content of the Belhar Confession deals with the question of reconciliation. Belhar confesses that:

We believe that God has entrusted the church with the message of reconciliation in and through Jesus Christ; that the church is called to be the salt of the earth and the light of the world; that the church is called blessed because it is a peacemaker.<sup>26</sup>

Now this message from the Belhar Confession reveals the nature of the church and its very existence and mission. The understanding of the church according to Belhar is that of a peacemaker, a reconciling community, and this ethical dimension of the church must be embodied. The Belhar Confession points out that the church's task is to be that of carrying the message of reconciliation. However, it is not only entrusted with the message, but the church itself is a peacemaker, the reconciler. If the church is the reconciler or a peacemaker, in its mission it becomes the salt and the light of the world that is not yet reconciled.

For Koopman the confessed reconciliation in Belhar reflects two dimensions of Paulinic thought of reconciliation, namely, reconciliation as *hilasmos* and reconciliation as *katalassoo*. Koopman explains that reconciliation as *hilasmos* has to do with the expiation of wrongs and stumbling-blocks to atonement (at-one-ment). Reconciliation as *katalassoo* refers to harmony in the relationship with the other. Koopman concludes that the reconciliation confessed in the Belhar Confession pleads for the removal of stumbling-blocks in the way of peaceful living, and also in the way of the embrace. It therefore implies opposition to injustices like racism, tribalism, xenophobia, classism, misogyny, homophobia, ageism and handicappism.<sup>27</sup> With this message of the Belhar Confession on reconciliation the DR family of churches can look back at their history and agree that in order to move forward, there is a need for reconciliation between God who reconciles us with God and with one another. It is evident that the lack of reconciliation is a serious challenge for the churches and societies. The lack of reconciliation becomes evident in church schisms, in racial violence that continue to take place and even in marriages. Without peace, churches, societies and even families cannot live a normal life of embracing peace and reconciliation.

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<sup>26</sup> See Botha and Naudé, *The Belhar Confession* (1986): 2011, 21.

<sup>27</sup> See Koopman, *Reconciliation and the Confession of Belhar* (1986). 2007, 97.

Again these questions can be asked: Why do we need reconciliation? How can we embrace this reconciliation? Is it really necessary to look back and dig up the past in order to move forward? What do we mean when we speak about costly reconciliation? In the case of the DR family of churches, will reconciliation change the situation of these sister churches and South African society? If these sister churches reconcile, how will their reconciliation become a powerful witness in society? These questions are very important and are real questions that go through our minds and imagination of the anticipated future. Knowing the background of Christianity and the damage caused by apartheid in church and society, the answer is simple and straightforward that we need reconciliation in order to move forward towards lasting visible unity.

In one of his speeches on reconciliation, especially during the time he was appointed as the director of the Christian Institute, the controversial South African church leader and Reformed theologian Beyers Naudé points out that not only is reconciliation a Biblical term, but it is quite clearly a Biblical truth – a New Testament concept that we should grasp and apply in honesty and humility if we want to call ourselves Christians. Naudé further argues that this is wholly a Christian concept, because the world knows and understands nothing about reconciliation.<sup>28</sup> For Naudé, this reconciliation has implications that are very costly. It implies that a totally new relation between God and man has been created in which man discovers, to his ever-increasing amazement, a new attitude and a new acceptance on the basis of his forgiveness that God bestowed, which Christ not only preached but also practised.<sup>29</sup> Naudé distinguishes between the easy task of preaching reconciliation and the hard part of making reconciliation possible in practice, which is the costly part. Further to this, Naudé also points out that without forgiveness, reconciliation is impossible. I must underline that reconciliation in this regard does not suggest that people must forget about the past, but it calls for a deeper internal transformation of the human heart and soul to forgive and live a new life of reconciliation with God and with other fellow human beings irrespective of the pain caused by the past. Reconciliation becomes possible when one is able to forgive and this is the cost of reconciliation that many wrestles with.

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<sup>28</sup> See B. Naudé, 2005. "From the Archives: Reconciliation". In: *The Legacy of Beyers Naudé: Beyers Naudé Centre Series on Public Theology Volume 1*, SUN PRESS, Stellenbosch, 2005, 139.

<sup>29</sup> See B. Naudé, *From the Archives: Reconciliation*. 2005, 139.

Reconciliation within the DR family of churches is very costly and the same can be said of the reconciliation of racial groups in society. Naudé seem to ask this question to the DR family of churches when he said: Do we realise the challenge this holds for us as Christians; that as long as we harbour a spirit of unforgiveness in our hearts, any reconciliation is made impossible?<sup>30</sup> This question does not only challenge us to forgive, but it also reveals the nature of a Christian; not to forgive is un-Christian. Forgiveness is the real meaning of costly reconciliation. Costly reconciliation will help these churches to come to terms with the past, confessing our guilt, exposing ourselves in the presence of God and with each other, telling our stories, even the terrible ones, and that way, we can look each other in the eyes and say “I am sorry, please forgive me for the known and unknown mistakes”.

Reconciliation is costly because it requires something of us, and that is to forgive one another irrespective of the past, especially when people ask for forgiveness. The biggest challenge to everyone is to forgive and live with peace. The Lord’s Prayer requires us to forgive those who did us wrong, as God forgave us and suffered on our behalf for our sins. The message from Belhar is that the church must commit itself to reconciliation and lead the society and the whole world towards the process of reconciliation. Another set of questions could be asked as to how the churches like the DR family of churches respond to this message after a struggle with apartheid and their split based on race? Are these churches willing to make a breakthrough on reconciliation and be better examples for South African society and other churches? Can the message of Belhar be received and well executed by these sister churches after the loss of life, land, livestock and brutal violation of human rights and dignity during the apartheid era in which the DRC was involved?

The Belhar Confession states that God’s life-giving Word and Spirit has conquered the powers of sin and death, and therefore, also of irreconciliation and hatred, bitterness and enmity; that God’s life-giving Word and Spirit will enable the church to live a new obedience, which can open new possibilities of life for society and the world.<sup>31</sup> If the DR family of churches can reconcile with each other as churches of different ethnic groups, classes, and if the DRC can also participate in reconciliation process in the society, a powerful, unique and indispensable contribution will therefore be made. According to Botha,

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<sup>30</sup> See B. Naudé, *From the Archives: Reconciliation*. 2005, 139.

<sup>31</sup> See Botha and Naudé, *The Belhar Confession* (1986): 2011, 21. See also Smit, 2012. *Oor die Teologiese inhoud van die Belydenis van Belhar*: 192-193.

in this process of reconciliation we simply have to risk proceedings with one another onto this road of reconciliation.<sup>32</sup> He further argues that the article on reconciliation addressed many people far outside the circles of the DRMC and that the prospect of reconciliation between church and state was extremely slim, as powers against it were strong. Botha remarks that during that time there was a great need for reconciliation in the country.<sup>33</sup> It must be noted that this does not suggest that today reconciliation is not needed in South Africa. The South African society, churches, people of faith and non-faith people including families struggle to embrace reconciliation and live in harmony with each other. The churches in South Africa, including the whole society, need to make reconciliation part of their agenda. Reconciliation is needed in situation where we have xenophobic attacks, killing of farmers and classification of human beings.

However, Botha is correct when he says the message of Belhar teaches us that we cause the Bible's message of the reconciliation to appear unreliable and that in a way, we undo its healing effects in advance if we say we are a Christian community, but we separate people on racial grounds. Beyers Naudé echoed this when he states:

If God in Christ has enacted the great reconciliation between Him and us then we begin to realize that all human relations are thereby affected and transformed. A new quality and content, a new spirit and approach thus become part of all our relations.”

Naudé further writes: “this change must be initiated by Christians in analysing all our motives and attitudes to ascertain whether any sinful division, any misunderstanding or animosity, any prejudice or fear has tainted our mutual relations as Christians”.<sup>34</sup>

Botha argues that we frustrate the message of reconciliation even more if we support alienation, hatred and enmity amongst people. He concludes that a Christian community is characterised by love and affection for one another, attentiveness towards one another and peace within the community.<sup>35</sup> It can be added that the message of reconciliation is frustrated even further if we stigmatise and demonise one another, especially people suffering from HIV/Aids. The Belhar Confession also states that the credibility of this message [of reconciliation] is seriously affected and its beneficial work obstructed when it is proclaimed

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<sup>32</sup> See Botha, *Belhar – a staff to lean on today and tomorrow*: 2011, 70.

<sup>33</sup> See Botha, *Belhar – a staff to lean on today and tomorrow*: 2011, 70.

<sup>34</sup> See B. Naudé, *From the Archives: Reconciliation*. 2005, 140.

<sup>35</sup> See Botha, *Belhar – a staff to lean on today and tomorrow*: 2011, 71.



in a land that professes to be Christian, but in which the enforced separation of people on racial basis promotes and perpetuates alienation, hatred and enmity.<sup>36</sup>

The Belhar Confession radically disproves the legitimisation of apartheid by appealing to the gospel. It is important to also highlight in this regard that the churches are now faced with another challenge where both reconciliation and justice are concerned; the issue of homosexuality.<sup>37</sup> Although this challenge will not be discussed fully here, it is important to mention that there are different voices of division within churches and in society about homosexuality. Many people have lost their lives as a result of their sexual orientation. This is a challenge that we cannot ignore if we speak of church unity and its significance towards social contexts. The Belhar Confession pleads for a reconciled church and a reconciled society. Under costly reconciliation I will briefly look at Belhar and the challenge of reconciliation in church and society, and the meaning of reconciliation from a Christian perspective.

### 7.3.1. Belhar and the challenge of reconciliation in church and society

There is no doubt that the church and South African society need reconciliation. It is evident that the apartheid system and the deliberate racism crisis in South Africa have developed to a stage of irreconciled people in church and society. The Belhar Confession offers some guidance to help the church and society in dealing with the question on how to become a reconciled church and society. However, more to the notion of reconciliation of people in South Africa, Naudé adds a very crucial question to the discourse on reconciliation in the Belhar Confession. In a very challenging way, Naudé ask whether Belhar can be called upon

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<sup>36</sup> See Botha and Naudé, *The Belhar Confession* (1986): 2011, 21.

<sup>37</sup> The genesis and developments to this challenge is very important if we speak of reconciliation. The URCSA worked on a research on homosexuality and the local congregations were requested to talk about it. However, it can be mentioned that the discussion and engagement on this homosexuality debate will take longer to be concluded. Congregations within the URCSA are not really talking around this and many people from this sexual orientation feel alienated and rejected by the church. It must be mentioned that a lot of frustration is growing amongst some gays and lesbians that belong to the URCSA. To some people in local congregations the challenge is on how to introduce this debate and who will drive it and give guidance without manipulating the process. I also just mention the challenge of homosexuality that the churches and society are facing today. A lot of gays and lesbians are killed for their sexual orientation in our communities. Our communities are becoming more violent and divided on this issue gays and lesbians. For the churches in South Africa, this challenge needs a special attention and God's intervention on this matter will harmonise the situation. Churches have different stances on the issue and this issue alone could be the cause of division if people are not well educated about homosexuality. The church cannot solve this problem and challenge alone, but different stakeholders and health organisations can work together in trying to educate and find solutions on how to live together in peace and harmony.

to establish true acceptance and reconciliation between men and women. He further asks: “Can Belhar assist us in overcoming deep prejudices against people living with HIV and AIDS?”<sup>38</sup> For him, both questions relate to gender relations and are of crucial importance for reconciliation and peace in church and society. It must be noted that the ethical question on reconciliation between men and women raised by Naudé was initially raised by the World Council of Churches under *Church and World* study document, under the very interesting theme, “*The Community of Women and Men*”, discussed in chapter two of this dissertation. These questions relate to ecclesiology and ethics, as well as on how church unity can be of significance to social contexts.

Naudé poses these questions to the challenge of Africa as a deeply patriarchal society and gender bias using the culture and tradition to escape the challenge of male dominance. With regard to the struggle for women’s rights in the world and also in the ecumenical church, Naudé states that it requires us to consider whether Belhar can be legitimately called upon to aid in the struggle for gender reconciliation. For Naudé, if people wish to argue for gender differentiation on the grounds of culture, biology, or even psychology, Belhar says that such differences because of Christ’s reconciliatory work are opportunities for mutual service and enrichment within the one visible people of God. Naudé further argues that Belhar’s article on justice has the potential of encompassing liberation, which includes gender.<sup>39</sup> Reconciliation is needed in situations like these and the communities are looking up on the church’s response to these questions.

It must be noted that reconciliation is a complex biblical term that includes God's invitation and our response to an ongoing conversion within a community of faith. Reconciliation is a process, it takes something from us and is in a true sense part of healing, and hence it is costly. The DR family of churches needs to undergo the same process of reconciliation. Many people within this family of churches suffered the injustices of the past, especially in the church and this also had serious implications in society. The involvement of the DRC on apartheid and racism caused a great harm to many people and families.<sup>40</sup> The events that took

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<sup>38</sup>See Naudé, *Neither Calendar nor Clock*: 2010, 185.

<sup>39</sup> See Naudé, *Neither Calendar nor Clock*: 2010, 186-189.

<sup>40</sup> For some of these depressing stories of apartheid and racism in South Africa, see Johan Botha, 2011. Belhar – good news for yesterday, today and tomorrow: 2011, 79-81. Johan Botha recalls that they had to keep praying constantly to the Lord to change our fate, that the Lord would help us to overcome the mutual enmity, and that God would help remove the unfamiliarity and insensitivity, and that without us witnessing with less ardour against the evil in our society, 2011,79. Botha also recalls that in contrast to the good news of Belhar, other

place in the church, especially the things that Black people experienced in and from the DRC and which also contributed greatly to the life in South African, calls for reconciliation.

The DR family of churches in many occasions were involved in a story telling process and confrontation in which the positive outcomes of this process could lead to true reconciliation instead of cheap reconciliation. True reconciliation is very costly and is difficult to achieve, as it involves the healing of memories and the wounds of the past; it may even take years before it is completed. Smit argues that there is a tight connection between reconciliation and justice. He states that true reconciliation is impossible without justice, and in his opinion, a spirit of reconciliation does not mean to ignore, to overlook, or even to shut our eyes to injustice and guilt. In connecting reconciliation and justice, Smit states that the reconciliation with God in Christ did not come about in the same way, however, the justice of God led to the death of his own Son on the cross.<sup>41</sup> This is the cost of our reconciliation with God and with one another; it came at a high price. Our understanding of reconciliation as the DR family of churches should be understood in the same way, in a vertical, as well as in a horizontal way.<sup>42</sup> The church as a peacemaker according to the Belhar Confession must embody reconciliation and teach the world on how to reconcile with each other. In a sense, reconciliation means the end of injustice and the new path of righteousness must be followed.

We cannot speak of reconciliation without justice or justice without reconciliation, because the one accompanies the other. B.J. Van der Walt correctly states that true reconciliation is difficult because it is based on restitution of rights and justice.<sup>43</sup> Van der Walt's statement directly speaks to the injustices and inequalities that were deliberately created by the apartheid policy and these could be a stumbling-block towards reconciliation. Daniël Louw, in his article titled, *The healing power of forgiveness*, wrestles with the question of reconciliation and justice in South Africa when he states that economic growth, social

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events and experiences continually reminded them that the situation was in fact becoming worse, that people's faith in God was at stake and the bitterness and enmity towards the good news of Belhar were reaching dangerous dimensions in our society. Johan Botha further narrate two stories that illustrates the situation in South Africa, the story of Maria Zotwane, who was forcefully removed with rifles at their backs from their home in 1984, and in June 1985 Botha illustrates his own experience in Duduza on the East Rand, See, 2011, 80-81. These stories articulate the anger and bitterness in South Africa that time, but it must be noted that they are not erased in people's minds. Hence, the call for reconciliation as healing for the church and society is necessary.

<sup>41</sup> See Smit, "*In a Special Way*": 1984, 55.

<sup>42</sup> See Koopman, *Reconciliation and the Confession of Belhar* (1986). 2007, 97.

<sup>43</sup> See B.J. Van der Walt, 1996. "Responsibility, Conversion, Confession, Forgiveness, Restitution, and Reconciliation: Six of God's requirements for a new South Africa". *Institute for Reformational Studies*, Potchefstroom University, 1996, 27.

development and a new orientation to future plans for growth in South Africa are not the only important issues. For him the equal important issue is how we are going to deal with the wrongdoings and injustices of the past. Louw argues that this is an issue of justice *versus* reconciliation. This points to the fact that the divisions in South Africa merely had to do with socio-economic factors and to correct this situation does not only require reconciliation, but it is also a question of justice in both, socially and economically. Louw further argues that South Africans will be confronted time and again with the issues of guilt and forgiveness, retribution and reconciliation.<sup>44</sup> This emphasises the link between the reconciliation and justice discourse for the South African context.

The German theologian Wolfram Kistner (who worked for the SACC), in his book titled *Justice and righteousness like a never-ending stream*, echoes Dirkie Smit and Van der Walt's view with regards to the connection between reconciliation and justice. Kistner reminds us of the *Kairos Document* that stimulated a discussion on the biblical notion of reconciliation for South Africa and other countries. Kistner states that one of the key contributions of the *Kairos Document* is the warning against the misuse of the biblical concept of reconciliation in terms of cheap grace, which dispenses Christians from taking a stand against injustice. With reference to the message of the *Kairos Document*, Kistner states: "No reconciliation is possible without justice, without the total dismantling of apartheid." *Kairos* continues to say: "What this means in practise is that no forgiveness and no negotiations are possible without repentance."<sup>45</sup> For Kistner, the South African churches, with the exclusion of the DRC, in their struggle against apartheid system in South Africa have resorted on two occasions to Paul's message of God's reconciliation with the world in Christ as the foundation of their resistance against the state: in the *Message to the people* of South Africa of 1968 and in the Belhar Confession of the DRC Mission Church of 1982. Kistner is correct when he says that the foundation for a new humanity has been laid in Christ, in which people are empowered to share their gifts and their resources. Kistner's plea with the church in its calling, despite of all the tensions and weaknesses prevailing in it, is to make this new humanity transparent in society.<sup>46</sup>

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<sup>44</sup> See Daniël Louw, 1995. *The Healing Power of Forgiveness*: In Duncan Buchanan and Jurgens Hendriks (eds.) *Meeting the Future: Christian Leadership in South Africa*, Pretoria, 1995, 149-151

<sup>45</sup> See Wolfram Kistner, 2008. *Justice and righteousness like a never-ending stream: Essays, reflections and discussion documents*. SACC, Johannesburg, 2008, 45. See Conradie, *Reconciliation*: 2013, 13. Conradie also notes the significant role played by the Kairos Document and the National Initiative for Reconciliation in dealing with the concept of reconciliation in South Africa.

<sup>46</sup> See Kistner, *Justice and righteousness like a never-ending stream*: 2008, 46.

For Kistner, God's reconciliation that has already been achieved through Christ should be the foundation of all efforts of Christians to promote justice and peace in human relations and in the relationship between humans and God's creation. It should be noted that this idea of Kistner is congruent to the approach of the World Council of Churches' stance on ecclesiology and ethics, especially the work of the Justice, Peace and Integrity of Creation commission as examined in chapter four of this dissertation. Kistner writes: "Reconciliation in the context of Paul's theology is of great significance in the struggle to overcome the hostility between humans and God's creation." He further says: "Christians' struggles for justice in human relationships are inseparable from their concern to articulate the cries of those parts of God's creation that are not in a position to speak on their own."<sup>47</sup> As part of God's creation, human beings are expected to take care of creation at all times.

From the perspective of the Christian understanding of God's comprehensive reconciliation, any punishment that is meted out to an offender and any amnesty that is granted are based on the reintegration of the offender into society and at the same time, to heal the wounds of the victims. Dirkie Smit, in his article titled *The Truth and Reconciliation Commission – Tentative Religious and Theological Perspectives*, writes and argues that the Christian church has naturally been in the business of truth and reconciliation, and guilt and forgiveness from its beginnings. Smit strongly argues that without remembrance, no liberation and reconciliation begins where repression ends. For him, confession literally means to acknowledge, to agree with God's judgement on your nature, your distinctive identity, your particular past, your personal deeds.<sup>48</sup> The confession of guilt and repentance within the DR family of churches will play a fundamental role in the endeavour of these churches on the role to true reconciliation.

With reference to the Belhar Confession, we must be reconciled with God and humanity with humanity. In our endeavours for church unity within the DR family of churches, it is required of these churches to look at each other's eyes, confess their guilt, acknowledge the wrong doings and repent. In this regard Louw states that forgiveness presupposes a clear understand of guilt. To construct a new South African society, we need a sincere understanding of guilt, which is the responsibility to confess that apartheid was a sin because it violated the ethical

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<sup>47</sup> See Kistner, *Justice and righteousness like a never-ending stream*: 2008, 46.

<sup>48</sup> See D.J. Smit, 1995. "The Truth and Reconciliation Commission: Tentative Religious and Theological Perspectives". In: *Journal of Theology for Southern Africa* 90, 1995/1, 3.

issues of justice, neighbourly love, humanity and charity, says Louw.<sup>49</sup> It is required of the churches to undergo a process of reconciliation and in God's way allow the process to take its course with obedience to God. With humiliation and humbleness before God, the members of the DR family of churches need to promote the same reconciliation and justice in the South African society.

### 7.3.2. The meaning of reconciliation - a Christian perspective

Seeing as the term reconciliation is used in various contexts, it is also true to say that it means people understand its meaning in different ways. With regard to the meaning of reconciliation in a Christian context, Conradie notes that the problem underlying conceptual clarification is that the term "reconciliation" is used in quite different ways in society. Conradie explains that this term of reconciliation is commonly used with regard to personal relationships that have become distorted and in such relationships some form of reconciliation is regarded as necessary to avoid unwanted tension and conflict and to allow the relationship to flourish again.<sup>50</sup> Conradie points out that in a Christian context, the term of reconciliation is also used in the same way, but he offers at least three additional layers of meaning that may be identified in Christian discourse on reconciliation:

- Reconciliation with God, following alienation as a result of what is re-described as "sin", understood as a broken, radically distorted relationship with God;
- Reconciliation through being one with Christ in the body of Christ (the church);
- The ministry of reconciliation through the Holy Spirit in church and society.<sup>51</sup>

This understanding of reconciliation shed light on how reconciliation within the circles of the DR family of churches can be approached after a long period of tension and conflict between these churches. This approach also delves in on how ecclesiological reconciliation can help society in dealing with reconciliation and peace. It further underlines that ecclesiology and ethics belongs together.

The Belhar Confession affirms the fact that the church is a peacemaker and a reconciler. The question could be asked how the church becomes a peacemaker and a reconciler if there are schisms within it. What does this reconciliation entail? What is the meaning of this

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<sup>49</sup> See Louw, *The Healing Power of Forgiveness*: 1995, 152-153.

<sup>50</sup> See Conradie, *Reconciliation*: 2013, 17.

<sup>51</sup> See Conradie, *Reconciliation*: 2013, 18.

reconciliation? Who participates in it? At what cost does this reconciliation come? Is there church really a peacemaker and a reconciler, given the history of its division? To put things into perspective is the DR family of churches really a peacemaker and does it really embody reconciliation? The Belhar Confession states that the ministry of Christ's reconciliation is now entrusted to the church (2 Cor. 5:11-21).<sup>52</sup>

Based on Paul, the Christian teaching on reconciliation can be summarised in different ways. In the first place, we observe reconciliation as the work of God, who initiates and completes reconciliation in Christ. Botha alludes to this fact when he says, we are called, but it is God who reconciles believers with one another. We are called, but it is God who conquers the powers of sin and death, of irreconcilability and hatred, of bitterness and enmity.<sup>53</sup> This clearly points out that reconciliation is not a human work, but the work of God himself within us. Reconciliation can be characterised as the experience of grace – restoration of one's damaged humanity to the life giving relationship with God.

Secondly, because reconciliation is principally God's work for which we are but 'ambassadors for Christ's sake' (2 Cor. 5:20), it could be characterised more as a spirituality than a strategy. Theologically speaking, reconciliation is a way of living that creates the space for new possibilities. Robert Schreiter underscores that churches have continued since the time of Paul to take upon themselves the mantle of reconciliation, calling warring parties to peace, working toward the end of alienation, pulling down the walls of hostility.<sup>54</sup> In line with Schreiter, Botha says that we are called, but it is God who creates new possibilities for our lives.<sup>55</sup> From this revelation of Schreiter, we see that the churches should take the responsibility of bringing divided parties, conflicting people and churches together by means of reconciliation. The Belhar Confession is clear about this role of the church as a peacemaker and reconciler.

Thirdly, the experience of reconciliation makes both victim and wrongdoer a new creation (2 Cor. 5:17). By entering in reconciliation, both the victim and the offender enter into a new life, where the old is left behind. This new life of reconciliation is embedded in the life of

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<sup>52</sup> See Botha and Naudé, *The Belhar Confession* (1986): 2011, 21.

<sup>53</sup> See Botha, *Belhar – a staff to lean on today and tomorrow*: 2011, 71.

<sup>54</sup> See R. Schreiter, 1992. *Reconciliation: Mission and Ministry in a Changing Social Order*. Maryknoll, Orbis Books, 1992, 64.

<sup>55</sup> See Botha, *Belhar – a staff to lean on today and tomorrow*: 2011, 71.



Christ, who reconciled us with God and with one another. Hence, the Belhar Confession says: “That God’s life-giving Word and Spirit will enable the church to live a new obedience which can open new possibilities of life for society and the world.”<sup>56</sup>

It must be noted that the experience of God’s reconciling work in Christ is not a restoration to our former state but, through the resurrection, is the dawning of a new humanity. The complexities of forgiveness and the healing of memories must also be seen from the perspective of a new creation, rather than the restoration of the old. Fourthly, we learn that the process of reconciliation that creates the new humanity is the narrative of the passion, death, and resurrection of Christ. The passion and death are remembered not for the gruesome and unjust torture that Jesus went through, but as a dangerous memory that subverts the power of injustice, which estranges humanity and the world from God. The resurrection is the confirmation and the manifestation therefore of God’s power over evil. Finally, reconciliation reveals the complexity of the world to be reconciled.

Reconciliation reflects the pastoral practice and theological understanding of the sacraments of initiation in each historical period. In the sacrament of baptism, human beings are brought into the people of God and by the sacrament of penance sinners are reconciled to God and the church. The church cannot underestimate the power of its rituals to mark the moments of transition in reconciliation. The need for reconciliation brings a new urgency to the celebration of the Eucharist. Reconciliation to God and the Church is worked out in the human situation. Therefore, this complex situation includes both pastoral practice and the particular social context in which Christians find themselves.

Kistner states that Paul’s concern about justification by faith can only be understood in the context of his experience of God’s reconciliation in Christ that comprises and has extended to the whole human community and to creation. It comprises even people who are not aware of it. As Kistner puts it: “We can resist God’s reconciliation, but we cannot undo it. In Christ the foundation has been laid for people to live together as a contrast society, not separate from the world.”<sup>57</sup> Kistner is correct when he states that the universal and cosmic reconciliation in Christ has already happened, it is God’s reconciliation in Christ and everyone is included,

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<sup>56</sup> See Botha and Naudé, *The Belhar Confession* (1986): 2011, 21.

<sup>57</sup> See W. Kistner, 1996. “The Biblical Understanding of Reconciliation”: In H.R. Botman and R.M. Petersen (eds.), *To Remember and to Heal: Theological and Psychological Reflections on Truth and Reconciliation*, Human & Rousseau, Cape Town, 1996, 80.



even our enemies. Our duty is to bring about reconciliation amongst people and love our enemies. God's reconciliation puts us on the spot light where we have to show love towards our enemies, even if they inflicted pain on us in various ways. As the victims remember the incidents of the past and the pain inflicted them, so should they also remember the Lord's Prayer "forgive us as we forgive those who trespass against us" in terms of reconciliation. This is the cost of reconciliation. This is exactly what is required of Christians to do as God's church in the world. Christians must follow the steps of Jesus Christ in forgiveness and reconciliation. God wants his church, his people, to live in peace and reconciliation. It can be said that this is what God wants the DR family of churches to go through, a true reconciliation process.

The church is called to be an agent of reconciliation by Godself. One could argue and say that the former South African President Nelson Mandela and Archbishop Emeritus Mpilo Tutu were our best examples of truth witnessing, forgiveness and reconciliation. The truth is that both these icons have focused on the idea that all human beings have been created in the image of God. However, it must be noted that there has also been distinct difference between them at the same time. On the one hand, Mandela has urged people time after time to let bygones be bygones, in order to achieve reconciliation; on the other hand, Tutu has continually emphasised the need for repentance and confession to achieve reconciliation. There was an important discourse between the political leader and the church leaders with regard to reconciliation in South Africa. Mandela, as a political leader, pleaded with South Africans to let bygones be bygones, whereas on the other hand, in line with Tutu, Kistner emphasised the need for confession and repentance. Kistner argues that from this perspective [of Nelson Mandela], we cannot make a new start in South Africa, unless the perpetrators of injustice acknowledge [repent and confess – as Kistner and Tutu suggests], in the presence of the victims, their participation in upholding the system of oppression for so long, and spell out how they want to contribute towards transformation. Kistner further suggests that churches in South Africa should encourage meetings between the perpetrators and the victims of injustice in local settings and allow people to tell their stories of sufferings.<sup>58</sup> This process will allow people to come to terms with the past and further open up the possibilities of acceptance and reconciliation. We need to be tolerant, willing to forgive one another and understand each other in the process.

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<sup>58</sup> See Kistner, *Justice and righteousness like a never-ending stream*: 2008, 47.

One of the core incidents of witnessing the stance of Nelson Mandela in peacemaking was when he was asked about the fears White people had after his release from prison. At that press conference he said:

I knew that people expected me to harbour anger towards whites, he commented subsequently. But I had none. In prison, my anger towards whites decreased, but my hatred for the system grew. I wanted South Africa to see that I loved even my enemies, while I hated the system that turned us against one another.<sup>59</sup>

It was at this stage where Mandela referred to himself as an architect of reconciliation. Someone had to lead the path towards the reconciliation of the country, and Mandela was not hesitant to take such initiative.

South Africa was at this stage torn apart and Black people did not see any chances of making peace with their White counterparts because of the injustices that they suffered and the death of many during the struggle against apartheid. For the South African situation, it is true to say that reconciliation must also be in terms of our materialistic willingness to share and by offering help to those who are in need. This is where the question of restorative justice and restitution throbs in. There is a need great need for restorative justice. We cannot speak of unity and reconciliation in South Africa if we omit to state how these can happen, if those who took land, who brutally murdered the bread winners of many homes, continue to promote racism and show no remorse about the past. It must be noted that some of these terrible events were done deliberately and in the name of the gospel. In an appeal for peace and reconciliation, Belhar rejects any doctrine that in such a situations sanctions in the name of the gospel or of sees the will of God in the forced separation of people on racial grounds and colour, as these obstructs and weakens the ministry and experience of reconciliation in Christ.<sup>60</sup>

John de Gruchy challenges us when he speaks of reconciliation in South African context. He raises some critical questions on daring to speak of reconciliation. De Gruchy states that daring to speak may suggest foolhardiness, the action of those who speak before thinking,

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<sup>59</sup> See Brian Frost, 1998. *Struggling to Forgive: Nelson Mandela and South Africa's Search for Reconciliation*. Harper Collins, London, 1998, 5-6.

<sup>60</sup> See Botha and Naudé, *The Belhar Confession* (1986): 2011, 21.

speak before listening and without concern for the consequences of what is said. But it may also reflect a deeper concern that reflects the ambiguity of our task. He goes further to ask:

How we dare speak of reconciliation in a world in which there is little justice for the victims of oppression, an immodest haste to forget atrocities and forgive perpetrators for their crimes. How dare we speak of reconciliation to a woman who has been raped by someone with HIV/AIDS? How dare we speak of reconciliation in a world where its rhetoric is hijacked by oppressors to prevent their prosecution and punishment? How dare we who are the beneficiaries of centuries of colonial injustice, speak of reconciliation between the races, between North and South?<sup>61</sup>

These are very important questions for the way forward and the future of South Africa society. They also help the churches to identify their role in South Africa, especially in efforts in making reconciliation and justice possible. The political discourse of reconciliation according to De Gruchy is profoundly immoral, because it denies the reality of what the people have experienced. Sensitive to his questions, De Gruchy states that we dare to speak of reconciliation because we dare not remain silent in a world torn apart by hatred, alienation and violence.

Piet Naudé notes that although the Belhar Confession was written before the full advent of the AIDS pandemic, its message and the words uttered in relation to racial prejudice echo remarkably true when applied to the topic of AIDS. Naudé refers us to an incident of a young woman was killed in 1998 by her own community because of the bitterness and hatred caused by fear-based stigma and discrimination of people living with HIV/AIDS.<sup>62</sup> The Belhar Confession clearly rejects such an act and appeals for a caring church and a caring society that follows on the footsteps of God. There is a lot of anger and hatred, both in and outside of the church. Church's witness to the South African context does not rely on its unity and reconciliation endeavours, but also on its call and witness to issues of justice. The discourse on justice is the third important content of the Belhar Confession.

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<sup>61</sup> See J. de Gruchy, 2002. *Reconciliation Restoring Justice*: David Philip, Cape Town, 2002, 16-17.

<sup>62</sup> See Naudé, *Neither Calendar nor Clock*: 2010, 190.

## 7.4. Costly Justice?

The Ecclesiology and Ethics debate states that Christians are often called to a *Costly Obedience* and that it may require the churches to position themselves in relation to the issues of particular times and places for the sake of *Costly Justice* that leads to a point of martyrdom. The Belhar Confession discusses that Costly Justice requires *Costly Obedience* to God and to one another. The discourse on justice in the Belhar Confession is very important when dealing with the history of the church and South African situation. The question of justice in South Africa breaks the very foundations of what apartheid was built on and lays a new foundation that transforms all the structures and walls of apartheid. Costly justice in the Belhar Confession puts the Christian community to a test of loyalty and obedience to God.

The Belhar Confessions states:

We believe that God has revealed Godself as the One who wishes to bring about justice and true peace on earth; that in a world full of injustice and enmity God is in a special way the God of the destitute, the poor and the wronged and that God calls the church to follow him in this; that God brings justice to the oppressed and gives bread to the hungry; that God frees the prisoner and restores sight to the blind; that God supports the downtrodden; protects the strangers, helps orphans and widows and blocks the path of the ungodly ...<sup>63</sup>

The Belhar Confession speaks of justice in action. The justice confessed in Belhar does not only refer to church and social contexts, but it also covers God's whole creation. God is revealed as a God of justice and that most importantly, Belhar does not separate justice from peace; they are linked together.

One should take note of the background in which this confession was formed. It can be said that the history of South Africa was overshadowed by intolerant injustices. The question of racism and the apartheid system in South Africa could not be tolerated and the White DRC was deeply involved. The injustices of the past laid the foundation for the birth of the Belhar Confession. The question that could be asked is what we mean by costly justice? How does this costly justice function? Does costly justice mean we have to give everything that belongs to us to others who never worked for it? Can the church be a powerful witness of God's justice? For the DR family of churches to play a fundamental role in South Africa, their

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<sup>63</sup> See Botha and Naudé, *The Belhar Confession* (1986): 2011, 22.

commitment to issues of justice will play a remarkable role, especially the DRC. The apartheid system did not only infringe on the rights and the future of those who suffered from it then, but it also killed the future and the hopes of many generations. Whenever the stories of the past are being told to the new generation and the physical scars of apartheid being shown to them, their eyes are full of tears and the frustration becomes visible in their faces. The system of apartheid cannot be described better than to state that it was a system of injustices and inequality, where mainly White people benefitted, including many church members.

#### 7.4.1. The Dutch Reformed family of churches and justice in Belhar

The Belhar Confession underlines the fact that we cannot speak of justice without peace, given the context in which the church, especially the DR family of churches and South Africa, find themselves. As the God of justice, God is revealed in Belhar as the One who confronts and rejects all the injustice and protects all the downtrodden. The Belhar Confession teaches us to use the lenses of looking at Jesus through the eyes of the other. At the Synod of the DRMC, Johan Botha tells that one delegate suggested that the relevant phrase should be expressed in the language of liberation theology: ‘God is on the side of the poor’ and the Synod rejected this idea on purpose and expressly, as it would have sounded as if God were on the side of some, and against others in a socio-economic class struggle in society.<sup>64</sup>

Dirkie Smit alludes to this fact when he states that several speakers during the DRMC Synod implied that they had reservations about the idea that God is ‘God of the poor’ or that he would be ‘on the side of the poor.’ In an informative way Smit states that the commission responsible for the formulation explained that which is expressed in the draft confession is simply the basic, historic biblical and Christian conviction that God is the help of the

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<sup>64</sup> See Botha, *Belhar – a staff to lean on today and tomorrow*: 2011, 73. This statement of the Belhar Confession is mostly misunderstood by many people, especially if the accompanying letter is not read before reading the confession itself. However, Nico Koopman also remarks that the idea that God is in a special way the God of the destitute, the poor and the wronged is a controversial formulation. Nico Koopman cites Dirkie Smit, who defends this formulation on biblical grounds by looking in the Old Testament laws, like the laws about the Sabbath, the Jubilee, tithes and usury; narratives about God’s continual rescuing of individuals and the people of Israel from danger and misery; the various ways in which the rights of the orphan, the widow and the stranger are protected; the doxological description of God as the Help of the helpless in the book of Psalms. See Koopman, 2002. “...in a special way” (2002, 253).

helpless.<sup>65</sup> It must be clearly understood that the Belhar Confession's discourse on justice is not political and it must not be understood in political grounds either. It is a biblical discourse and the understanding of God's justice as articulated in the Bible. I want to highlight that the article on justice in the Belhar Confession is the most contested article, as many people, including Christians, misinterpret the discourse on justice in this confession. Costly justice in the Belhar Confession deals with the heart of the entrenched racism, socio-economic inequalities and long lived tensions between races in South Africa. Above all, it challenges the status quo of white supremacy.

In an informative way, Smit states that God revealed himself as the one who wants to bring justice and true peace amongst people; the same God calls his church to follow him on this ...*'In a discipleship way'* (my emphasis). In his own understanding of the justice of God, Smit argues that God's justice does not in the least mean that he is neutral, unconcerned, and uninvolved with regards to human misery, distress and suffering or with regards to relationships and structures of injustice, exploitation, and oppression. However, Smit says that God is the God of justice precisely because he defends and protects those without any rights or those to whom justice is not being done. His righteousness is an active, helping righteousness that saves, liberates and restores justice.<sup>66</sup> It is evident that part of the church's calling is not only to witness to issues of justice, but to put justice into practice in the world. The church must be an ecclesiology that embodies ethics in faith, life and witness.

For Botha, the article on justice in the Belhar Confession is about the image of God. Botha argues that ours is the God who cares for those in need and that God is compassionate, particularly towards those who cannot help themselves; hence, the church is called to follow our Lord on this in assisting those in need and those who suffer and to witness and fight against any form of injustice.<sup>67</sup>

Many people, including Christians, could not really understand God's love and care for the poor, the helpless, and the oppressed during these dark days of our country. However, God's justice for them was linked with those who were in power and who at the same time inflicted

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<sup>65</sup> See Smit, "In a Special Way": 1984, 58.

<sup>66</sup> See Smit, "In a Special Way": 1984, 59. See also Smit's emphasis on God's justice for the poor and that through biblical tradition God hears the prayers of those in need and see their suffering and that he cares for them, forgives and receive, help and comforts them with compassionate justice. See Smit, *Oor die Teologiese inhoud van die Belydenis van Belhar*: 193-195.

<sup>67</sup> See Botha, *Belhar – a staff to lean on today and tomorrow*: 2011, 73.

the pain to the helpless. At that stage of oppression in South Africa, many people thought that God is taking sides with the White oppressors of the time. This idea became evident some time ago, when Desmond Tutu, at the Beyers Naudé memorial lecture in 2008 at the Stellenbosch Faculty of Theology, made a statement in his speech, saying that one day when he is in heaven with God, he would ask God on whose side was he standing during the apartheid era in South Africa when a lot of Black people suffered injustice and some lost their lives, land and homes. What Tutu was trying to convey here was the question of the justice of God. If God is the God of justice, the following questions can be asked: Why did he allow apartheid to happen and only a certain race benefited from it? If he is the God of love, then where was his compassionate love and care when many people suffered and died of apartheid injustice? Was it God's justice for people to die for what belongs to them? Was it God's justice for White people, including his church people, the DRC, to endorse racism as God's will? Many people wrestle at times with the questions of God's compassionate justice and love for all his people.

Whilst we were growing up, there were pictures in our homes where Jesus Christ was depicted as a white male and Satan as a black man on fire, with the fork at his back. This picture had a clear message and meaning that Christ is for White people and Satan for Black people. This picture, for obvious reasons, created tensions and led people to believe that God's justice is for a certain racial group, and that group is the White people. Perhaps the exploitation of many Black people by their White bosses starts there. Hence, many liberation theologians, like James Cone in America, took this understanding of Christ very radically on the discourse about the Black Messiah, as he once mentioned that if Jesus Christ appears in a Black community as a White man, that Christ must be killed because he is an oppressor. This was a strong and very radical reaction of liberation theology.

However, it must be noted that the many people still ask the same questions in the new democratic South Africa to the church and also to the government: Why is the church so quiet about the injustices in South Africa? What happened to the church's voice that stood firm against racism and apartheid as unjust and ungodly? Where is the church's voice? If people are really free today in South Africa, why are they still living in shacks? Why are they still unemployed? Why are the children and women still being abused and raped by men? Is this just? If justice rolls like a river and God's compassion are shown by Christians to all, why do people still go to bed hungry? Why there is no distribution of wealth to all? Why does South

Africa still has two worlds, those are rich and those are poor? Is South African democracy just enough?

These are complex questions in which the church could play a fundamental role in explaining and witnessing this compassionate justice and love of God to many. Botha further explains that by saying ‘in a special way’, the Belhar Confession is true to the richness and fullness of the Bible, which unendingly witnesses to compassion towards those in need, the weak, victims, suffering, widows and orphans, the poor, the marginalised in society, the oppressed and the hungry, the downhearted and sad, the deaf and the blind, the wronged – God has a special tenderness of heart for them. Botha appeals to Christians to be exactly like this and be seekers and agents of compassionate justice.<sup>68</sup>

Botha also alludes to this fact when he writes that the compilers of the Belhar Confession needed to find new words in order to confess justice, as their debates were only around unity and reconciliation. Botha argues that the compilers of the Belhar Confession allowed themselves to be guided by the Word of God and indeed, in Scripture God is described as powerful, righteous and just and that God has compassion for people, especially for the suffering, the poor and the wronged.<sup>69</sup>

I must state that this new debate on justice and God opens up new possibilities for the actualisation of reconciliation. Without justice, there is no reconciliation.<sup>70</sup> Hence, Desmond Tutu and Wolfram Kistner’s view on confession and repentance plays a fundamental role in making justice and reconciliation possible. Confession and repentance will make the perpetrators of injustice realise their wrongdoings. Koopman states that the new dimension to the discourse of justice has much significance for the unity and reconciliation in society and within churches, and especially within the DR family of churches. Koopman is of the opinion

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<sup>68</sup> See Botha, *Belhar – a staff to lean on today and tomorrow*: 2011, 73.

<sup>69</sup> See Botha, *Belhar – a staff to lean on today and tomorrow*: 2011, 73.

<sup>70</sup> There is a growing debate amongst many Black people when discussing the danger caused by apartheid amongst people and in society and on how reconciliation can be achieved in order to be a rainbow nation of God, as Archbishop Mpilo Tutu would say. When it comes to reconciliation, many Black people argue that reconciliation cannot be achieved before justice, especially the restitution of land. Many Black people believe that in order for South Africa to be a reconciled country, the land must be given back to the initial owners. The discourse goes further to state that if one’s land is taken away by force or stolen, before the wrongdoer asks for forgiveness, the land must be given back first, then reconciliation will follow. In other words, a system of justice precedes reconciliation. This view can be understood, but I want to argue and say reconciliation and justice go together; they cannot be separated. Whether we start by reconciliation, justice will step in and whether we start by restoring justice, reconciliation automatically steps in. I think we cannot keep on saying justice first then reconciliation; these two go hand in hand.



that reconciliation is also qualified by the confession about justice in which God's justice led to the death of his Son on Calvary.<sup>71</sup> Koopman is correct in this regard, because this is what makes justice costly and never cheap. This also qualifies the whole debate on ecclesiology and ethics in (chapter four) where church unity is confessed as *Costly Unity* and never cheap, and that such *Costly Unity* requires our *Costly Commitment* towards *Costly Reconciliation* with Godself and with one another; and that such reconciliation must be manifested in the life of the church in a *Costly Obedience* to God whilst witnessing to the *Costly Justice* of God in the world. It is such justice that the Belhar Confession speaks about, the compassionate and social justice of God. There is a tight connection between reconciliation and justice, and this is what makes unity possible and visible. If reconciliation or justice is absent, then any form of unity becomes disastrous.

Nicholas Wolterstorff strongly argues that there is no *shalom* without justice. Wolterstorff further argues that the peace, which is shalom, is not merely the absence of hostility, not merely being in right relationships. A nation may be at peace with all its neighbours and yet be miserable in its poverty. Wolterstorff is also of the opinion that to dwell in the peace that is shalom, is to enjoy living before God, to enjoy living in one's physical surroundings, to enjoy living with one's fellows, and also to enjoy life with oneself.<sup>72</sup> He states that justice, the enjoyment of one's rights, is indispensable to shalom because shalom is an ethical community. *Shalom* cannot be secured in an unjust situation by managing to get all concerned to feel content with their lot in life. As he puts it:

It is because *shalom* is an ethical community that it is wounded when justice is not done, when justice is absent. The right relationships with one another, involves right relationships to God, to creation, and to oneself.<sup>73</sup>

There is a need to restore the same right relationships with God and with one another within the DR family churches. The history of division amongst these families of churches explains and exposes injustice in different ways. The Belhar Confession pleads that we embrace unity, not in the absence of reconciliation and justice. It also pleads that we cover ourselves with the true reconciliation and look at one another through the lenses of justice in our endeavour to embrace who we are as the *Imago Dei* (image of God). Russel Botman points out that it is

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<sup>71</sup> See Koopman, 2002. "...in a special way" 2002, 256-257.

<sup>72</sup> See N. Wolterstorff, 1983. *Until Justice and Peace Embrace*: William B. Eerdmans, Michigan, 1983, 70.

<sup>73</sup> See Wolterstorff. *Until Justice and Peace Embrace*, 1983, 71.

difficult for the DRC to accept the Belhar Confession if it regard the Belhar Confession as a stumbling block for church unity. Botman observes that the work for reconciliation and justice will be vital for church unity. He further points out that the message of the Belhar Confession is nothing other than that of God's calling for his church to be an agent of reconciliation and justice.<sup>74</sup> This clearly points to the ethical dimension of the church, the church as social ethic.

The Belhar Confession's message on justice is in line with *Costly Commitment* and *Costly Obedience*, it pleads with the church to take the role of justice very seriously, especially with regard to moral formation of its members to become morally good citizens. What the church teaches has serious consequences towards society, and this calls for a serious consideration.

It is evident that from what Botman and Smit, as well as Wolterstorff are saying with regard to church unity, reconciliation and justice, that there is no separation between ecclesiology and ethics. There is a deeper connection between ecclesiology and ethics and they cannot be separated. God calls the church to stand where He stands; with the poor and the wronged. However, against this analysis, the church's responsibility is clear. The discourse on justice in the Belhar Confession poses a challenge to the DR family of churches in their endeavours for the visible unity of the church. If these churches can stand where God stands with regards to His advocacy for compassionate justice, and that these churches stand firm against any form of injustice, a tangible difference can be made. Justice cannot only be contested by words, but the DR family of churches needs to do what is right and stand for the righteousness of God and his compassionate justice. Justice must be taught by the family of churches, but it must also be seen in action in them.

#### 7.4.2. Belhar and the concerns of justice in South African context

South Africa is still wounded by the injustices of the past. This invisible woundedness manifests itself in different ways. It highlights the fact that the TRC has done part of the job on national reconciliation, but was that enough? What about justice? Johan Botha states that the article on God's compassionate justice is particularly applicable to us in South Africa.<sup>75</sup> Most of us will agree with Botha in this regard. Given the background of South Africa and the state of affairs in our new democracy at present, it can be said that justice is not a once off

<sup>74</sup> See H. R. Botman, 2001. Belhar and the white Dutch Reformed Church: Changes in the DRC: 1974-1990, in *Scriptura* 76 (2001), 38.

<sup>75</sup> See Botha, Belhar – a staff to lean on today and tomorrow: 2011, 74.

event, but it must be a practice of our daily living, and must be part of us and our lives every day. In the context of South African society where people were divided on racial grounds, where justice benefited a certain group of people and many lost their lives in fighting for equal quality of life and rights, Belhar says the justice of God is for all. How does Belhar respond to the question of economic justice today? How does Belhar help us to correct the inequalities caused by the injustice of the past? In terms of the justice addressed in Belhar, how do we correct the social-economic imbalances caused by the system of apartheid in South Africa? How does Belhar encourage those who have wealth to equally distribute and share with those who do not have, especially the wealth that was acquired unjustly? The dealing with justice asks too much of us and it makes us vulnerable because we must participate in it. Justice does not accommodate selfishness, self-centredness and an individualistic way of living; it accommodates equality, unity and peace.

As much as the Belhar Confession speaks of God's compassionate justice towards the poor, the wronged, and the marginalised, Belhar does not neglect the fact that God also has compassion towards those who are victims of HIV/AIDS, those who are used for human trafficking, those who suffer death through mob violence because of their sexual orientation, the old women who are killed because they are accused of witchcraft, and the women and children who are abused and raped every hour in South Africa. God cares and in a special way his compassionate love is shown to them. The rich and the poor, the marginalised and the free, Black people and White people, all of them carry the image of God. God's compassionate love is much extended to those who cannot defend themselves against all injustices done to them. For Botha, precisely because we follow Christ according to what we confess in Belhar, we should do what is good and right to those in need.<sup>76</sup> In this manner, the church must stand where the God of love stands; against all injustice and with the wronged.

For the South African context, the work of justice is not completed in a society where millions of people were excluded and alienated from their land, as this is a challenge for restorative justice. Again, on the question of land restitution we see that justice is served on an optional basis, where the applicants are being asked whether they want money as a replacement for their land or they want their land back. Although this act of justice sounds good in the ears of many, it is not fair enough to the owners of the land, as I believe that they

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<sup>76</sup> See Botha, *Belhar – a staff to lean on today and tomorrow*: 2011, 73.

must gain their land and decide on their own whether to sell it or not. In fact, the land restitution and land redistribution in South Africa is a difficult issue to handle. A lot of compassionate justice is to be shown in a country where various diseases like HIV/AIDS, tuberculosis, and malaria kill millions. Justice is needed in a society like South Africa, where hundreds of people feel unsafe on the streets, and where many women work in the streets with fear of being raped and brutally murdered, where millions of South Africans are still living in shacks, and where some of them are still homeless.

Justice is needed in a country where millions of people are still under the conditions of misery, living in tents after heavy rains and destructive fires that burnt down their shacks, where people still live under dilapidated buildings. Irrespective of these situations, Belhar pleads with the church to stand where God stands, against all injustice. However, as a God of compassionate justice, God is with his people under these circumstances and hence, he calls his church to follow him in this. The Belhar Confession rejects any doctrine or ideology that justifies injustice on the basis of the gospel, as it was the case with the DRC. However, Botha states that the Belhar Confession was not aimed against certain people or churches as the accompanying letter also states. This confession was made as the witness from God's Word to us and to our children, however, for the present and for the future, for here and elsewhere.<sup>77</sup>

The Belhar Confession was confessed in obedience to Jesus Christ as the head of the church. For the situation of apartheid in South Africa, the Belhar Confession confesses against the unevangelical convictions and theology on which apartheid was based and Belhar is grounded in the abundant witness of the Bible, says Botha.<sup>78</sup> For him, what Belhar states is our faith in the witness that comes from the heart of the gospel itself. Unity, reconciliation and justice are tightly connected to each other. As Botha puts it: "The visible, embodied unity of the church presupposes true reconciliation and compassionate justice."<sup>79</sup> This reflects the nature of the church and that it must live this unity for the world to see, the communities must see it, and it must be the symbol of reconciliation, a peacemaker and strive towards bringing compassionate justice of God to the needy, both within and outside of the church.

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<sup>77</sup> See Botha, *Belhar – a staff to lean on today and tomorrow*: 2011, 74.

<sup>78</sup> See Botha, *Belhar – a staff to lean on today and tomorrow*: 2011, 75.

<sup>79</sup> See Botha, *Belhar – a staff to lean on today and tomorrow*: 2011, 76.

With regard to the challenges of justice in South Africa, where young children are being raped, where we witness a lot of violence against women and children, where millions of people are exploited, what contribution has thus far been made by the DR family of churches to address these matters, especially the URCSA, looking at what Belhar's discourse on justice teach us? Do these churches contribute anything to the South African society in terms of their witness on justice issues and their understanding of God's justice? Seeing as South Africa is coming from the apartheid history and strong racism, there is a lot to be done in terms of correcting the past, and this is where the justice question comes in. The church has a fundamental role to play in this regard, especially the DR family of churches. It is true to say that the churches and South African society are still suffering from the damage caused by the apartheid system in a so-called 'democratic society'. But it must also be understood that we cannot stay focused on the past; churches need to get their hands dirty by working for justice and peace in and outside the church. Even in this new era of national unity and democratic society, there is a still great need for justice in South Africa, given the present state of the country where there is corruption even in the government. Belhar contends that the church must do what is good and right, so is also the responsibility of government towards all its citizens.

#### 7.4.3. The meaning of justice - a Christian perspective

Jesus Christ in the New Testament proclaimed the intervention of God's justice on behalf of the needy and the oppressed. Jesus identified himself with his least brethren when saying, "Insofar as you did this to my least brethren (giving a cup of water, visiting the imprisoned...) you did this to me" in Matthew 25:40. This is the basic teaching of what justice means to us as Christians. In any form of justice there is an exercise on it; it must be practised and not just preached. In his words, Jesus is trying to reveal exactly that and the Belhar Confession affirms this by stating that God instructs God's church to follow him in doing justice. The Belhar Confession plays a vital role in addressing God's justice from the Christian perspective and the role of the church towards justice in church and society.

For a Christian church for instance, love of neighbours and justice cannot be separated. Love implies the absolute demand for justice, recognition of dignity and the rights of one's neighbour. It is also important to note that the concepts of 'justice' (*mishpat*) and 'righteousness' (*sedaka*) cannot be divorced from covenantal love, because with regard to all

the facets of society, it entails that believers will on a regular basis ask what is right in God's sight, and will combat all injustice. It also entails that we strive for justice for all groups in our country with regard to social, educational, economic, political matters, and in all other spheres of life. Justice and righteousness describes the heart and the inner being of God; they cannot be separated. Both describe goodness and they are part of and fruit of reconciliation. It must be noted that the biblical understanding of justice and righteousness are concerned with the defenceless in the covenant community, those lacking the means to maintain themselves, to maintain their families, those who are widows, orphans, the poor and the most vulnerable, as well as the strangers, as explained in the Belhar Confession, where God is described as a God who cares and helps those who cannot help themselves.

The Biblical notion of justice, as with reconciliation, is about relationships; especially the quality of a relationship, whether such relationship is understood in terms of interpersonal or group relations or our relationship with God and creation as a whole. De Gruchy puts it nicely when he states:

Justice requires that Christians work for a just society that corresponds to a covenant of grace. Such a view of justice is not hard-hearted, especially towards those who are poor, disreputable or unable to plead their own cause, but merciful.<sup>80</sup>

In an informative way, De Gruchy further argues that God's justice is the justice of restored relations, and that an understanding of justice is inseparable, even if distinguishable from love, and one that finds expression in liberation from oppression and reconciliation both within personal and social relations. It must be noted that the principles of restorative justice are not foreign to Christians, as they flow directly from central concepts such as accepting responsibility, making restitution, asking, receiving and extending forgiveness, and healing. It will be very interesting to see on how the Belhar Confession responds to the demands of land reform and land redistribution in its discourse on justice. Restorative justice can be understood as an attempt to recover certain neglected dimensions that make for a more complete understanding of justice and it focuses rehabilitation and compensation on the recovery of dignity and the healing of social wounds. As with the DRC repentance for misusing God's name in oppressing others, so it is also necessary that God's concern for

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<sup>80</sup> See De Gruchy, *Reconciliation: Restoring Justice*: 2002, 202.

justice is upheld. It is essential to correct centuries of unjust social and political practices through the redistribution of land and resources to those who suffer such injustices. Compensation or reparation for loss of livelihood, education, health and the death of loved ones, however inadequate this might be, is a demand for justice. For various reasons, but especially with its call towards justice, the Belhar Confession remains a highly contested church document within the Reformed Church circles.

### **7.5. Some remarks on the reception of the Belhar Confession in the Dutch Reformed Church and abroad**

Although the Dutch Reformed Church (DRC) has accepted the Belhar Confession, some church orderly processes with regard to its discussion by congregations and presbyteries, its adoption, and its reception and inclusion in the Church Order still needs to be followed. This process will still take some time to be concluded. The Belhar Confession was proposed for adoption by the DRC Western Cape and Southern Cape Synod in May 2011 at Goudini, attended by about 700 delegates. In her article titled *The Belhar Confession: Born in the struggle against apartheid in Southern Africa*, Mary-Anne Plaatjies-Van Huffel observes that the following proposal was adopted by the Synod:

Synod is convinced that the Biblical claim for justice to all people, reconciliation among people and the unity of the church belongs to the essence of the Gospel. The Confession of Belhar expresses the Gospel claim for justice, reconciliation and unity in a different way than the other Confessions of the church. The Synod, as a church meeting, adopts the Confession of Belhar and therefore requests the General Synod to make the Confession of Belhar part of the confessional base of the DRC in a church orderly way.<sup>81</sup>

Plaatjies-Van Huffel states that the matter was decided by ballot papers at the Synod, where 544 against 124 voters (approximately 80%) were in favour of the Belhar Confession. Later the same year, the October 2011 DRC General Synod in Boksburg agreed to follow a church orderly process in including the Belhar Confession as part of its confessional basis. In his article titled *The Reception of the Belhar Confession in the Dutch Reformed Church and Church Polity Discourse*, Robert Vosloo points out that at this fourteenth session of the DRC

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<sup>81</sup> See M. Plaatjies-Van Huffel, [http://uir.unisa.ac.za/bistream/handle/10500/9977/Plaatjies\\_Van\\_Huffel\\_11.pdf](http://uir.unisa.ac.za/bistream/handle/10500/9977/Plaatjies_Van_Huffel_11.pdf) [Accessed 24 April 2014].

General Synod in October 2011, to the surprise of many, the Synod decided with an overwhelming majority (of around 90%) to support the proposal of accepting the Belhar Confession. Vosloo further says the Synod took the following decision:

The General Synod decides to make the Belhar Confession in a church-orderly manner part of the church's confessional base and commissions the Moderamen to start the necessary church order(ly) processes (kerkordelike prosesse) that are required in this regard.<sup>82</sup>

The original decision of the 2011 DRC General Synod on the Belhar Confession reads as follows:

Die Algemene Sinode besluit om Beskrywingspunt B.3, soos gewysig te aanvaar:  
Die Algemene Sinode besluit om die Belydenis van Belhar op kerkordelike wyse deel van die NG Kerk se belydenisgrondslag te maak en dra dit aan die Moderamen op die nodige kerkordelike prosesse hieroor in werking te stel.<sup>83</sup>

It must be noted that this decision happened after several meetings were held between the URCSA and the DRC from 2009-2012. The President of the World Communion of Reformed Churches, Jerry Pillay, was invited to facilitate some of these meetings.<sup>84</sup> In my introductory chapter I have indicated the stance of this process as it was discussed once again by the October 2013 DRC General Synod in Port Elizabeth, and that the URCSA leadership raised concerns about this Synod's position with regard to the Belhar Confession.

It can be said that initially the DRC regarded the Belhar Confession as a dangerous document that creates doubts and will bring more division. The DRC's argument for the rejection of the Belhar Confession was built round the confession's history and its contents. Botha points out that some viewed the Belhar Confession as a document that addresses important issues that affected the former DRMC and is therefore not merely applicable to a wider context. Botha recalls that in contrast to the experience of "the good news" of Belhar, other events and experiences continually reminded them that the situation was deteriorating, that people's faith in God was at stake, and that the bitterness and enmity towards what many perceived as the

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<sup>82</sup> See R. Vosloo, 2014. The reception of the Belhar Confession in the Dutch Reformed Church and Church Polity Discourse. In: *Church Polity and Ecumenism, Global Perspectives, Volume 3*, Leo J. Koffeman, Allan J. Janssen and Johannes Smit (eds.), LIT Verlag, Germany, 2014, 74.

<sup>83</sup> See <http://www.ngkerkas.co.za/wp-content/uploads/besluiteregister2011.pdf> [Accessed 17 July 2014].

<sup>84</sup> See Plaatjies-Van Huffel, [http://uir.unisa.ac.za/bistream/handle/10500/9977/Plaatjies\\_Van\\_Huffel\\_11.pdf](http://uir.unisa.ac.za/bistream/handle/10500/9977/Plaatjies_Van_Huffel_11.pdf) [Accessed 24 April 2014].



good news of Belhar were growing.<sup>85</sup> This shows that there was a strong resistance to the Belhar Confession, which led to more strenuous relationships in church and society.

Vosloo observes that the reception history of the Belhar Confession in the relatively brief period of its existence demands thorough and careful (church historical) analysis. For Vosloo a serious theological engagement is needed in accessing the promise and pitfalls of using the Belhar Confession in the light of some of the challenges facing the church today. Vosloo further notes that from the outset the Belhar Confession has had an emotional and contested reception in the DRC ever since it was accepted in draft form in 1982.<sup>86</sup>

In line with Robert Vosloo, Piet Naudé points out that there were negative reactions on the Belhar Confession from inception. Naudé recalls that in 1984 there was a strong negative view on the draft Confession and the DRC thought that the *status confessionis* was unnecessary. Naudé states that the prevailing view was that alienation, hate and enmity could not unilaterally be attributed to the political system.<sup>87</sup> According to Naudé a new perspective developed during the next few years, and at the DRC 1990 General Synod the following decision was tabled:

- The GSC is aware that the Belhar Confession was handled and adopted with the utmost sincerity by the DRMC Synod and that the content of the Confession concerns issues of fundamental significance to the Mission Church in particular.
- The GSC is of the opinion that the Belhar Confession in itself is not in conflict with the Forms of Unity and that it need not bring about separation among churches.<sup>88</sup>

In fact, the General Synod of the DRC had serious problems with the formulation of the Belhar Confession, especially with paragraph 4, stating that it could have been formulated

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<sup>85</sup> See J. Botha, 2011. "Belhar – good news for yesterday, today and tomorrow": in Johan Botha and Piet Naudé: *Good News to Confess: The Belhar Confession and the road of acceptance*, Bible Media, Wellington, 2011, 79-80.

<sup>86</sup> See Vosloo, *The reception of the Belhar Confession*, 2014, 72-73.

<sup>87</sup> See P. Naudé, 2011. "The reception of Belhar in the DRC": in Johan Botha and Piet Naudé: *Good News to Confess: The Belhar Confession and the road of acceptance*, Bible Media, Wellington, 2011, 100-101. Naudé also relates on how he was touched by the painful pleas on behalf of the DRC during the debate of the draft confession at the DRMC Synod in 1982. Naudé states that their explanation with regard to Belhar that it was not personal, but aiming at the false teaching did not help as emotions ran too deep. He mentions two reasons why it was so difficult to accept Belhar: Firstly, Naudé states that they associated Belhar with the history of its origins to such an extent that history blinded them and prevented them from making objective judgments, and Belhar became Boesak's confession. Secondly, they struggled to hear Belhar and despite the clear universal intention of the Confession and the accompanying letter, they knew that they were the real addressees of Belhar. (2011, 101-102.

<sup>88</sup> See, Naudé, *The reception of Belhar in the DRC*: 2011, 104-105.

differently and that the explanation given in *Kerk en Samelewing* of the Lord as the God of the “poor and the wronged” reflects Biblical pronouncements more clearly in this regard. The GSC emphasised that in future discussions between the two churches, both the Belhar Confession and Kerk en Samelewing should act as the basis for such discussions.<sup>89</sup> Naudé is of the opinion that the GSC shows the understanding for the cry-from-the-heart character of Belhar; it was adopted ‘with the utmost sincerity’.<sup>90</sup> This alone is exciting news, not only for Naudé, but for many people who understand the content and the message that Belhar is trying to communicate. The DRC seem to understand the content of Belhar when they acknowledge that the confession concerns issues of fundamental significance to the DRC Mission Church in particular. By this recognition, Naudé states that the DRC declared that issues such as unity, reconciliation and justice were of fundamental significance to the DRMC in particular.<sup>91</sup> It is of utmost importance that the DRC from this stance take initiatives in making a contribution towards restoring peace and justice, not only amongst the DR family of churches, but also towards the divided South African society.

The Belhar Confession was adopted by many other Reformed churches around the globe, whilst others are still in the process of adopting this confession. Piet Naudé, Mary-Anne Plaatjies-Van Huffel and many other Reformed theologians wrote extensively about the reception of the Belhar Confession by other Reformed churches based on their own historical contexts. Amongst these churches are the Evangelical Reformed Church in Africa (ERCA), the Protestant United Church (Belgium), the Reformed Church (Iglesia Reformada Dominicana), and the Reformed Church in America (RCA).<sup>92</sup> Plaatjies-Van Huffel states that these churches were recommended to reflect, to study and to respond to the Belhar Confession as means of deepening their commitment to dealing with racism and disunity.

According to Naudé, the Reformed Church in America (RCA) also confessed the Belhar Confession. Naudé states that at their General Synod of 2000 their Commission on Christian Unity was instructed to commend the Belhar Confession to the church for reflection, study,

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<sup>89</sup> See, Naudé, *The reception of Belhar in the DRC*: 2011, 105. See also Plaatjies-Van Huffel, [http://uir.unisa.ac.za/bistream/handle/10500/9977/Plaatjies\\_Van\\_Huffel\\_11.pdf](http://uir.unisa.ac.za/bistream/handle/10500/9977/Plaatjies_Van_Huffel_11.pdf) [Accessed 24 April 2014]. Plaatjie-Van Huffel states that in 1994 the DRC reported to the WARC that they are not willing to accept the Belhar Confession.

<sup>90</sup> See, Naudé, *The reception of Belhar in the DRC*: 2011, 105.

<sup>91</sup> See, Naudé, *The reception of Belhar in the DRC*: 2011, 106.

<sup>92</sup> See Plaatjies-Van Huffel, [http://uir.unisa.ac.za/bistream/handle/10500/9977/Plaatjies\\_Van\\_Huffel\\_11.pdf](http://uir.unisa.ac.za/bistream/handle/10500/9977/Plaatjies_Van_Huffel_11.pdf) [Accessed 24 April 2014].

and respond as means of deepening the RCA's commitment to dealing with racism and strengthening its ecumenical commitment to the URCSA and other Reformed churches. The Belhar Confession was accepted at the General Synod in Pella, Iowa, in June 2007. Amongst other churches in the process of receiving the Belhar Confession is the Presbyterian Church in the USA (PCUSA). Naudé states that a recommendation was made at the 218<sup>th</sup> General Assembly (2008) that a committee be appointed to consider amending the confessional documents of the PCUSA to include Belhar in the *Book of Confessionis* for that church, and Belhar would enjoy full reception in the PCUSA in 2010.<sup>93</sup>

The General Assembly special committee on the Belhar Confession to the 221<sup>st</sup> General Assembly (2014) of the Presbyterian Church (USA) recommended unanimously that the 221<sup>st</sup> General Assembly 2014 approves the inclusion of the Belhar Confession in the Book of Confessionis, and that this amendment must be sent to the presbyteries for their affirmative or negative votes by June 2015. Furthermore, it was recommended that the 221<sup>st</sup> General Assembly adopt "The Accompanying Letter to the Confession of Belhar from the 221<sup>st</sup> General Assembly 2014 of the PCUSA as a statement reflecting the confession, conviction, and rationale of the PCUSA based on the implications of this confession for their time and ministry."<sup>94</sup> Following this recommendation to the 221<sup>st</sup> General Assembly 2014 of the PCUSA that was held on 14-21 June 2014 at Detroit, the report from the General Assembly with regard to Belhar states that the Assembly voted 551-87 (86%-14%) in favour of the Belhar Confession. This percentage of votes sends the Belhar Confession to the 171 presbyteries for their votes to include Belhar in the PCUSA's Book of Confessions. The report further states that Belhar must be approved by two-thirds of the presbyteries and then by 2016 General Assembly for it to become part of the denomination's doctrinal statements.<sup>95</sup> It becomes evident that the Belhar Confession as a church document that pleads for unity, reconciliation and justice is still of significance, not only for Christians, but in an inclusive manner and in all levels of life. The church and the world need Belhar more than ever. If the

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<sup>93</sup> See P. Naudé, 2010. *Neither Calendar nor Clock: Perspectives on the Belhar Confession*, William B. Eerdmans, Michigan, 2010, 135-138.

<sup>94</sup> For these recommendations see, [www.pcusa.org/report-and-recommendations-to-ga-2014/pdf](http://www.pcusa.org/report-and-recommendations-to-ga-2014/pdf) [Accessed 24 April 2014].

<sup>95</sup> Assembly In Brief, [http://www.pcusa.org/site\\_media/media/uploads/oga/pdf/assembly-in-brief-ga221\\_combined.pdf](http://www.pcusa.org/site_media/media/uploads/oga/pdf/assembly-in-brief-ga221_combined.pdf) [Accessed 21 July 2014]. The report also notes that the 2010 Assembly approved Belhar 525-150, but it failed to gain approval by the presbyteries, falling eight votes short (108-63) of the required super-majority.

church and the world can embody this confession, an indispensable contribution will be made towards the whole creation of God.

## 7.6. Conclusion

This chapter argues for the need of bringing and keeping ecclesiology and ethics together. There are some similarities between the Ecclesiology and Ethics debate and the Belhar Confession debate on ecclesial role in ethics. It can be concluded that both debates point to the fact that ecclesiology and ethics belong together, they cannot be separated. The Ecclesiology and Ethics debate and the Belhar Confession debate strongly emphasise that the unity of the church is costly, it is not cheap. Furthermore, these debates emphasise that Christians and churches' *Costly Commitment* towards *Costly Reconciliation* must be done in a *Costly Obedience* to God and to each other in the search for the *costly justice* of God. The *costly justice* of God is impossible without *Costly Obedience* to God and to each other; hence, it calls Christians and churches to a *Costly Commitment* with each other in their search for *Costly Reconciliation* and to serve as peacemakers in the world. This process delves in on the role of church unity in social contexts and emphasises that the church has a bigger role to play in a world that is not reconciled and where the justice of God is not served.

As mentioned earlier, this dissertation seeks to understand the role that church unity can play in social contexts. The Belhar Confession debate, in line with the Ecclesiology and Ethics debate, offer some helpful answers to the question this dissertation asked in the introduction chapter, namely, what is the social significance of church unity in social contexts? In relation to the Belhar Confession, an answer to this question is outlined. For Belhar, the issue of church unity cannot be disconnected from reconciliation and justice issues. This affirmation in the Belhar Confession also stresses the Ecclesiology and Ethics affirmation that the *Costly Unity* debates cannot be disconnected from our *Costly Commitment* to each other and that such commitment requires our *Costly Obedience* to God and to each other as we face life and death issues of our particular time and place.

As for the DR family of churches, there is still much to be done with regard to their unity and reconciliation, as this will help with the fostering of justice in the church and in society. Belhar also teaches us that church unity and reconciliation needs everyone's contribution and engagement, as well as everyone's commitment and willingness to go an extra mile for the

unity and reconciliation that we seek. One of other significant highlights in the Belhar Confession's teaching on justice is that it raises similar questions and those questions resulting from the whole debate of moral formation and malformation of the World Council of Churches. The message of Belhar expresses serious concerns for how justice is done in formation of morally good Christians and morally good citizens of the country in avoiding any risk of injustices and corruption. This was clearly articulated in chapter four of this study on Ecclesiology and Ethics, especially with reference to *Costly Unity*, *Costly Commitment*, and *Costly Obedience*. In these three consultations and the concomitant reports, churches are encouraged to costly unity, which is not cheap, to costly commitment to each other especially in facing the challenges of the world and justice issues, and to costly obedience to God and to their calling. A similar trend is found in the Belhar Confession. The church and South African society do not need cheap reconciliation and cheap justice. Our unity as the church and the South African society goes through painful memories; it opens up wounds in order to allow healing to take its course properly.

From the history of apartheid and the church's role in this regard, we learn that in order to have a hopeful future of a united, reconciled church and South African society, we have to deal with the question of justice, and this is where the heart of unity and reconciliation lies. In fact, the article on justice is much contested in the Belhar Confession, especially the emphasis on God who chooses to stand by the poor and the oppressed. Belhar remains a highly contested document in this regard, even on the structure and forms of the unity presented in the confession. Justice teaches us to go through the painful process of reconciliation, dealing with the terrible past and injustices in our search for true reconciliation and visible unity.

There are many other challenges in South Africa where the need for the reinterpretation of Belhar for our times becomes a vital exercise. South Africa is faced with challenges of corruption, the stigmatisation of people living with HIV/AIDS, an expanding gap between the rich and the poor, a lack of service delivery, an alarming crime rate, moral decay, the abuse of women and children, and gender-based violence.

For the DR family of churches, Beyers Naudé's speech on reconciliation still challenges us as individual Christians and as the church as a whole with regard to forgiveness. How willing are we as this family of churches to forgive one another? Can we exemplify Christ on the reconciling work as also articulated in the Belhar Confession? Does the URCSA embody the

message of reconciliation as articulated in its own confession? The message of Belhar on unity, reconciliation and justice will always challenge us as Christians to stand against all injustice in our communion. The last chapter will make some concluding remarks on church unity and social contexts.

## Chapter 8

### Church Unity and Social Contexts: Some concluding remarks

#### 8.1. Introduction

The methodology that was proposed for this study was to look at two important church debates on the unity of the church, namely the Ecclesiology and Ethics debate of the World Council of Churches (WCC) and the debate around the Belhar Confession (BC) of the Uniting Reformed Church in Southern (URCSA). The main aim and focus of this dissertation was to investigate the role and the significance of church unity for social contexts. In the introductory chapter some relevant questions regarding the significance of church unity towards social contexts were asked. Throughout this dissertation the role of church unity and its contribution towards social contexts was at the center of the inquiry.

In the introductory chapter I introduced these two debates on church unity in and indicated the attempts of bringing ecclesiology and ethics together in a fruitful way. Both discourses reflect a long history of tension in keeping ecclesiology and ethics together.<sup>1</sup> The first was the church debate on Ecclesiology and Ethics with the tension between two opposing views of the Faith and Order and Life and Work commissions of the WCC. In the previous chapters I have explained that the Faith and Order commission focused mainly on the unity of the

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<sup>1</sup> For a short summary of these conferences that dealt with tensions between Faith and Order and Life and Work commissions of the World Council of Churches - See P. Lodberg, 1995. The History of Ecumenical Work on the Ecclesiology and Ethics: In *Ecumenical Review* Volume 47 No. 2. April, 128-136. As an extreme expression of this tension the Stockholm conference of Life and Work in 1925 used a punch-line statement –“Service unites – doctrine divides.” This clearly marked the tension between these two commissions of the WCC. Only at Oxford world conference of Life and Work in 1937 where this false statement between service and doctrine could not be maintained, and the punch-line is accordingly: “Let the church be the church”, See Lodberg, The History of the Ecumenical Work, 1995, 132-133. With reference to this tension between Faith and Order and Life and Work commission and the South African perspective on church and society, see E.M. Conradie, 2013. Notions and Forms of Ecumenicity: Some South Africa perspectives. In: *South African Perspectives on Notions and Forms of Ecumenicity*: in Ernst M. Conradie (ed.) Sun Press, Stellenbosch, 2013, 25-28.

For the South African long history of ecclesial tension between what the church is and what it does is outlined in the South African church history on segregation, racism and later apartheid policy that fully legitimised as the DRC church law. This history is captured in the work of various theologians such as: J.C. Adonis, 1982. *Die afgebreekte skeidsmuur weer opgebou: Die verstrengeling van die sendingbeleid van die Nederduitse Gereformeerde Kerk in Suid – Afrika met die praktyk en ideologie van die apartheid in historiese perspektief*, Editions Rodopi B.V, Amsterdam 1982. Netherlands. See Richard Elphick, 2012. *The equality of believers: Protestant Missionaries and the racial politics of South Africa*, University of KwaZulu-Natal Press. See Chris Loff, 1981. *Dogter of Verstoteling?* Cape Town. See Chris Loff, 1983. The history of a heresy. In: *Apartheid is a heresy*: in John W. De Gruchy & Charles Villa-Vicencio (eds.), David Philip, Cape Town. See Hermann Giliomee, 2003:2.83, ‘The Weakness of Some’: The Dutch Reformed Church and White Supremacy, in *Scriptura International Journal of Bible, Religion and Theology in Southern Africa*.

church, whilst the Life and Work commission focused mainly on the issues of justice, peace and the integrity of creation (JPIC). Faith and Order maintained the significance of church unity and church doctrine without any attention to ecclesial advocacy to socio-ethical issues.

It took the WCC decades to combine the work of the Faith and Order and Life and Work commissions together under Ecclesiology and Ethics. After a number of consultations held to resolve the tension between these commissions, especially the consultations on *Costly Unity* at Rønne, on *Costly Commitment* at Tantur, and on *Costly Obedience* in Johannesburg, as discussed in chapter four, they managed to reconcile these two commissions. A conclusion was reached that there is no ecclesiology without ethics and no ethics without ecclesiology. *Costly Unity* debates cannot be successful without *Costly Commitment* towards our calling and to our vocation, which requires *Costly Obedience* that we owe to God and to each other. This conclusion affirms the fact the unity of the church cannot be disconnected from the church's call witness and service in the world.

The role and the responsibility of the church's witness and service do not end only within its circles; the church must go beyond itself where God calls it for witness and service. I must point out that the whole notion of *koinonia* in chapter three of this dissertation laid an important foundation for bringing ecclesiology and ethics together by affirming that *koinonia* expresses the visible unity of the church we seek, a unity where all members in their diversity participate in witness and in service in the world. In this *koinonia*, the full expression of *Costly Unity*, *Costly Commitment* to each other in the search for the visible unity of the church in *Costly Obedience* to God who called us, is realised.

The second debate surrounding the Belhar Confession is also the product of the tension between ecclesiology and ethics as discussed in chapter five and six of this dissertation, especially regarding the involvement of the church in racial division, racism and apartheid policy that became a law of the White DRC. Although in principle the doctrine of church unity was strongly recommended by the DRC, in practice the DRC was racially divided. The serious question was on how we live unity and express it in the world in the face of racial prejudice, separate worship buildings and apartheid policy that exploits Black people within the DRC. However, we also read from Russel Botman's foreword to the book of Johan Botha and Piet Naudé, titled *Good News to Confess: The Belhar Confession and the road of acceptance*, that there were also strong tensions between the members of the previous Dutch



Reformed Mission Church (DRMC) before the adoption of the Belhar Confession.<sup>2</sup> Despite the challenges that arose during that time, the Belhar Confession was adopted and signed in 1986. It is because of these tensions where the church debate in the Belhar Confession became a moment of truth in an attempt of speaking truth to power in addressing this predicament. The Belhar Confession is very straightforward regarding the role of church unity and its significance to social contexts. I want to argue that the Belhar Confession is an ecclesiology *and* ethics church document. Belhar deals with the critical question of church unity on the one hand, and the role of the church in reconciliation, peace and justice on the other hand without disconnecting these from each other. These three articles of Belhar on unity, reconciliation and compassionate justice of God articulate the ethical engagement of the church very clearly. The discourse on unity, reconciliation and justice in the Belhar Confession is therefore tantamount to the discourse on *Costly Unity*, *Costly Commitment* and *Costly Obedience* in Ecclesiology and Ethics of the WCC. The *Costly Unity* of the church requires *Costly Commitment* of Christians and churches in their search for visible unity and reconciliation and that this is impossible without *Costly Obedience* to God who called us to serve God's compassionate justice in the world.

The Belhar Confession draws the conclusion that in our search for the visible unity of the church there is no reconciliation without justice and no justice without reconciliation; these two go together. In fact, the Belhar Confession states that the debate on the unity of the church is as important as the debate on reconciliation and justice, especially for the situation of the DR family of churches. One cannot speak of church unity without authenticating ethical implications of such unity. In this way the Belhar Confession also shed some light on the significance of church unity towards social contexts. The Belhar Confession debate and Ecclesiology and Ethics debate conclusively affirm that ecclesiology and ethics belong together. They both affirm that the unity of the church cannot be disconnected from its calling to witness and service in the world that suffers from divisions, racism, hatred, demonization

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<sup>2</sup> See Russel Botman's foreword in Johan Botha and Piet Naudé: *Good News to Confess: The Belhar Confession and the road of acceptance*, Bible Media, Wellington, 2011, 11-13. Botman explains that in the 1980s the Belhar Confession poured out the balm of Gilead over a badly divided Dutch Reformed Mission Church (DRMC). He argues that on the one hand, some reconciliatory thinkers were accused of practising cheap grace, whilst on the other hand stood the activist pursuers of justice who were also accused of impermissible liberation thinking. Another group pleaded for church unity and was rejected as being fearful of the full implications of Biblical unity, as hiding behind the spiritual unity characteristic of apartheid theology. Russel Botman concludes that the Belhar Confession was like a balm that healed their hardened opposition towards each other, for Belhar pulled down the walls of separation among the different groupings within the DRMC of the time.

of people, lack of peace and reconciliation, stigmatisation of people suffering from HIV/Aids, victimisation, and the abuse of women and children in a world where millions of people are exploited and where marriages as symbols of this precious unity are now exposed to divorce that opens an opportunity to disunity in families. Hence, this dissertation sought to investigate the role that church unity can play in social contexts, also in post-apartheid South Africa.

It is evident that South Africa is still not reconciled and its citizens are not at peace with each other. The physical scars and the psychological damage that apartheid caused to humanity in South Africa and its remnants are still the major cause for the struggle for forgiveness, reconciliation and justice today. However, it can be further argued that democracy in South Africa did not bring the expected justice and peace in society, especially with regard to economic justice and equality. South Africa is facing more life threatening challenges today, including the unhealed wounds of apartheid. There is more to be done by the church and government regarding national unity, the reconciliation of people and the justice for all in South Africa. South Africa society is still deeply a divided society and this has serious implications to the life of the church, especially with regard to coming to terms with the past. Churches can play a significant role in this regard in terms of helping people to forgive and make peace with each other.

The following questions can be asked in this regard: What methods can be used to help deeply divided churches such as the DR family churches and the nation together to a state of true reconciliation that will foster justice to flourish like a river in the new South Africa? What role can the unity of the DR family of churches play in the South Africa, especially with regard to the moral decay crisis in which the country is steadily sliding towards? These questions are very important for the churches today in their struggle for reconciliation and justice in church and society. Currently, from an ecumenical perspective, the churches in South Africa are faced with a challenge of ecumenism and disunity. The disunity of the churches in South Africa strongly reflects the weakness of their *koinonia*. The weakness of their *koinonia* also translates the reality of their ecumenism challenge. The end result of these weaknesses hinders the credible witness and service of the church in society. It is because of this reflected reality of divisions that this dissertation proposes church unity will be of significance towards social contexts where the realities of disunity, lack of reconciliation and justice are most experienced. In this concluding chapter I will discuss three significant issues that reflect the absent unified ecclesial voice regarding the contemporary socio-ethical

challenges; namely, the challenge of disunity and ecumenism for the South African churches, the current stance of ecumenism and the crisis of moral decay in South Africa, and the significance of church unity in social contexts. In my concluding remarks I will shed some light on the lessons for the DR family of churches on unity. I will affirm the view that the interrelation between *koinonia* and witness be maintained. Communion and confession goes hand in hand. Fellowship and the response to the *kairos* are at the heart of what it means to be church. In addition, I will point to the importance of further exploring the notion of the body of Christ as a powerful theological metaphor to emphasise visible church unity amidst diversity. Although a thorough discussion falls beyond the scope of the study, it is also suggested that an interaction with the powerful, albeit contested, notion of Ubuntu holds promise for the discourse on unity and its significance for (Southern African) social contexts.

## **8.2. The challenge of disunity and ecumenism for the South African churches**

The challenge of disunity amongst churches is not a new challenge at all, but history shows that disunity became more than just a challenge; it became a serious crisis in the world. It moved churches and societies from a state of disunity to fragmentation. Disunity poses more than just a threat in the life of the churches and societies, but it becomes more harmful and disastrous towards these structures. Disunity means the lack of communion and a sense of ecumenism. Ecumenism reflects the *koinonia* and the commitment of a purposeful church in the world. Some questions can be asked, such as whether we really need ecumenism? Why is ecumenism so necessary? What can we do together as churches as part of our calling to witness and service in the world?

Nico Koopman helps us in describing the ecumenism that we need today. He calls it an embracing ecumenism. Koopman uses the expression “embracing ecumenism” in two ways in this regard. He explains that, firstly, it refers to the fact that when we talk about ecumenism, the surfacing ideas mostly include notions such as reaching out to the other, seeking unity with the other, encountering the other, communing with the other, worshipping with the other, participating in the life of the other, dialoguing with the other, cooperating with the other, and transforming with the other. Secondly, it also refers to a fresh commitment and dedication to the idea of ecumenism, to the idea of witnessing and

evangelising together, of seeking truth together, of discerning the will of God together, of worshipping together, of celebrating together, of being church together, of serving life together, of seeking a life together of dignity, justice and freedom, therefore of peace and joy, in the context of the integrity of creation.<sup>3</sup> I find Koopman's description very helpful for the present South African situation regarding the churches' struggle for a purposeful and meaningful ecumenism. The other remarkable observation on ecumenism is that of Pope John Paul II. According to Reinhard Hütter, the Pope published a document *Ut unum sint - That they may be one* on the theme of ecumenism and made a significant call for the unity of Christians. Hütter states that the Pope emphasised that the commitment to ecumenism must be based upon the conversion of hearts and upon prayer. Hütter further states that for Pope Paul II ecumenism must concern itself with overcoming complacency, indifference, and insufficient knowledge of one another and with the 'purification of past memories' through mutual re-examination of long-standing misgivings and prejudices.<sup>4</sup>

There is a need for a meaningful and purposeful ecumenical unity of churches, especially after the collapse of apartheid South Africa and the new democratic South Africa with its new challenges of national unity, reconciliation, and justice. The biggest challenge in the new South Africa is the moral regeneration challenge. This is also why the questions asked in the introductory chapter of this study seeks to investigate whether church unity can help to challenge the moral decay in society and whether such unity can be a powerful source to influence morally good citizenship. The churches need to help people in making moral decisions in closing the curtain of the old South Africa and to open a new curtain of the new South Africa with its new challenging realities. Koopman states that in our ecumenical endeavours we strive to confess and embody the four central features of the church, namely the catholicity of the church, the unity of the church, the apostolicity of the church and the holiness of the church.<sup>5</sup> The embodiment of these features of the church is also an expression a meaning and purposeful unity of the church towards social contexts.

The reality is that South African churches are facing a challenge with regard to ecumenism. Reflecting on the lack of ecumenism, the South African theologian and human rights lawyer

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<sup>3</sup> See N. Koopman, 2013. Embracing Ecumenism Today: In: *South African Perspectives on Notions and Forms of Ecumenicity*: in Ernst M. Conradie (ed.) Sun Press, Stellenbosch, 2013, 95.

<sup>4</sup> See R. Hütter, 2004. *Bound To Be Free: Evangelical Catholic Engagements in Ecclesiology, Ethics, and Ecumenism*. William B. Eerdmans, Michigan, 2004, 187.

<sup>5</sup> See Koopman, Embracing Ecumenism Today. 2013, 95.

Barney Pityana reckons that the ecumenical movement in South Africa has always been less than ecumenical. According to Pityana the divisions of apartheid did not leave the churches unscathed and the sin of apartheid did not leave the churches without blame. For him this has partly to do with the fact that the South African Council of Churches (SACC) became an instrument of resistance on behalf of the churches and that the apartheid agenda had been driving the ecumenical agenda of the SACC since 1968.<sup>6</sup> The SACC focused on the socio-ethical dimension of the church in South African society. The need for a meaningful and purposeful ecumenism becomes clear in this regard. For decades the SACC was the main ecumenical structure that spoke on behalf of the churches in South Africa. Currently, the reality is that the SACC is no longer the strongest ecumenical structure, as in the years of church struggle against apartheid in South Africa. Pityana further observes that there were no relations between the work of the SACC and the Church Unity Commission (CUC) which worked outside the formal structures of the SACC. Pityana's suspicion in this regard is that the CUC did not entertain the task that Faith and Order commission of the WCC attempted in bridging the gap between ecclesiology and ethics. Pityana suspects that there were no formal links between what the SACC was doing and the concerns of the CUC as this led to the assumption that the CUC was not interested in social issues.<sup>7</sup> What is revealed here is not only the lack of working relations between the CUC and the SACC per se, but the real disconnection between ecclesiology (which is the main focus of the CUC) and ethics (which is the main focus of the SACC).

However, the SACC and the WCC had something in common regarding the role of the church in social contexts. Barney Pityana underlines this reality when he points out that the World Council of Churches and the South African Council of Churches led the way in international and domestic resistance to apartheid.<sup>8</sup> For Pityana there are two significant streams from this ecumenical approach, namely, the socio-ethical examination of Christian responsibility in the face of manifest evil and the unity of the divided churches in the world.<sup>9</sup> I must underline that these two streams of ecumenical approach brings the significant discourse on ecclesiology and ethics to the fore. This also highlights the fact that various socio-ethical realities that threaten the life of the church and society require ecumenical

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<sup>6</sup> See B. Pityana, 1995. *The Ecumenical Challenge for South Africa*. Studies and Reports by the Ecumenical Foundation of Southern Africa – EFSA, Development Forum, February 1995, 7.

<sup>7</sup> See Pityana, *The Ecumenical Challenge for South Africa*. 1995, 8-9.

<sup>8</sup> See Pityana, *The Ecumenical Challenge for South Africa*. 1995, 2.

<sup>9</sup> See Pityana, *The Ecumenical Challenge for South Africa*. 1995, 2-3.

approach and response. It becomes evident that through the SACC the churches in South Africa had a strong voice especially in opposition of the unjust system of apartheid.

The following questions can be asked regarding the SACC, the voice of the church and its role in society: Can the new leadership of the SACC under the presidency of Bishop Ziphozihle Siwa (the Presiding Bishop of the Methodist Church of Southern Africa - MCSA) revive the SACC to be more proactive in its agenda after the collapse of apartheid in South Africa? Who speaks on behalf of the churches in South Africa today? What role do churches in South Africa play together, especially regarding the various socio-ethical challenges the country is currently facing? The reality is that the church is called by God to be the church of significance that carries a huge responsibility of being an instrument for reconciliation and fostering social justice of God in the world. Thus, the church cannot neglect its vocation in the world. The *Church and World* study document in chapter two of this dissertation has discussed this significant connection between the unity of the church and the church's call to witness and service in the world.

In an attempt to answer the above asked questions regarding the role of the church in society, especially in the new democratic South Africa, in his article titled “*On the impact of the church in South Africa after the collapse of the apartheid regime*,” Dirkie Smit observes that it was much more than the apartheid regime that collapsed in South African society as this country went through dramatic and radical times than just the change of government. For Smit, the collapse of the apartheid regime and the sudden change of the political sphere only prepared the way for the real, radical and lasting changes, affecting every fibre of society.<sup>10</sup> I must highlight that these radical changes that affects every fibre of society also indicate that the church has a massive role to play together with government. The damage caused by the apartheid system propels the church to take a leading role in the process towards forgiveness, reconciliation, and justice for all in South Africa. The process towards forgiveness and reconciliation is a moral decision making challenge. Pityana points out that the government faces the challenge of maximum unity amongst all the diverse peoples of South Africa, as well as the challenge for the churches in setting up a moral tone for the nation.<sup>11</sup> In my view, although much has been done to achieve the goal of national unity, the reality is that South

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<sup>10</sup> See D.J. Smit, 2007. On the impact of the church in South Africa after the collapse of the apartheid regime. In: *Essays in Public Theology, Collected Essays 1, Study Guides in Religion and Theology 12*, Ernst M. Conradie (ed.), SUN Press, Stellenbosch, 2007, 59.

<sup>11</sup> See Pityana, *The Ecumenical Challenge for South Africa*. 1995, 10-12.

Africa is still a deeply divided country with most people still in tight connections with the past. This is the challenge for the church in South Africa.

Smit helps us to distinguish at least three forms of the “church” very carefully in this regard. He states that the expression “church” can mean different things to different people and can also refer to different realities. Firstly, Smit says, people think of “church” as the local congregation gathered for worship and celebration and organised to belong to one another and supporting each other. The impact of this kind of worship and congregational life is fascinating, but also very complex to understand. Secondly, for others “church” refers to denominations and the ecumenical church. In this case, people always think of their own confessional and traditional body to which they belong. Smit further states that the story of churches in South Africa has been, and still is extremely complex and confusing; it is a story of many stories. As Smit puts it:

Although some politicians do their best to make people believe otherwise, and although it is certainly no longer the same colour-line and ethnic divisions of the apartheid era, the reality is still that South Africa is a very complex society, with many internal divisions and separations, of history, culture, economic status, and yes, also still of race. This has an impact on the church.<sup>12</sup>

Thirdly, others think of “church” in the form of Christians as believers, as salt of the earth and the light of the world, each involved in their own daily ways of following Jesus Christ and confessing the faith through their lives and actions. Smit further states that this impacts on the role of Christian people in public life, in politics and in the economy.<sup>13</sup> It must be noted that all three different understandings of the “church” as explained by Smit have a significant role to play in society. These distinctions are helpful for the interest of this dissertation in expressing different levels of ethical engagement of the church in social contexts. I must point out that the church in South Africa can play an indispensable role in this regard in terms of being a ‘peacemaker’, as the Belhar Confession would say. By virtue of its nature and calling, the church is called to carry the message of reconciliation and justice to the world. This task is much easier when churches embrace ecumenism in a meaningful and purposeful way by showing commitment towards the common cause.

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<sup>12</sup> See Smit, *On the impact of the church in South Africa*. 2007, 65.

<sup>13</sup> See Smit, *On the impact of the church in South Africa*. 2007, 61-68.



### **8.3. The current stance of ecumenism and the crisis of moral decay in South Africa**

Ecumenism in South Africa is currently very complex and even more challenging than before. What makes it even more challenging is the influence and the interference of government on religious matters. According to Conradie, when President Jacob Zuma took charge as the State President in 2009, Pastor Ray McCauley of the Rhema Bible Church formed a new interfaith organisation called the National Interfaith Leadership Council (NILC). He states that the attempts made to bridge the tension between religious leaders who continued to recognise the National Religious Leaders Forum (NRLF) and NILC were unsuccessful, and the matter remains politicised in terms of their respective alignments with factions within the African National Congress (ANC) and with other political parties. Conradie further states that NILC was replaced in 2011 by a joint structure called National Interfaith Council of South Africa (NICSA). This ecumenical structure called NICSA was allegedly initiated by President Zuma and it is highly politicised in terms of their alignment with the governing political party, namely, the ANC.<sup>14</sup>

On the 28 November 2012 just before the Mangaung conference of the ANC, the Presidency published a statement that President Zuma met with the National Religious Leaders Council (NRLC) led by Pastor McCauley with the aim of introducing the new forum to the President, following a name change when NICSA was supposed to be officially launched.<sup>15</sup> Conradie underscores that the 17 January 2013 National Church Leaders' Consultation (NCLC) (the structure in which I serve as the secretary) alleged that such new interfaith structures were not established by religious leaders but by a government commission and that such a structure would not be recognised as representative by the church leaders present.<sup>16</sup> There are two things of concern that I want to point out in this scenario that creates tension between churches in South Africa. The one is the interference of government on religious matters in a disrespectful way of undermining the national constitution regarding the freedom of religion, and the other is the leadership and representation in the new structure, namely, the NRLC. The NRLC is comprised of religious leaders and political party members, especially the ANC members.

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<sup>14</sup> See Conradie, *Notions and Forms of Ecumenicity*. 2013, 14-15.

<sup>15</sup> See Conradie, *Notions and Forms of Ecumenicity*. 2013, 15.

<sup>16</sup> See Conradie, *Notions and Forms of Ecumenicity*, 2013, 14-18.



There is a strong tension between the government and the NCLC. The public statement made by the ANC chaplain Rev. Vukile Mehana (a minister in the MCSA) during his meeting in Cape Town in February 2014 with two hundred church leaders where he reprimanded church leaders for criticising the ANC and government reflects exactly this tension. In his own words, Rev. Mehana warned the church leaders, saying: “You cannot have church leaders who speak as if they are the opposition. You hear some of them say, I will pray for the downfall of this government.”<sup>17</sup> Rev. Mehana further denied the rumours that the ANC government is corrupt by arguing that the ANC had been founded on moral, ethical and religious values in 1912. He mentioned that the ANC was formed at the foot of the altar.<sup>18</sup>

Rev. Mehana’s encouragement of the church leaders to join the ANC complicates, in my view, things even further for ecumenism in South Africa. William Everett, the social ethicist at Andover Newton Theological School, strongly opposes church leaders who become politicians and churches that align themselves with political parties. Everett states that the healing of the Christian divisions is part of the healing of the nation. But for this healing to occur, the churches must separate themselves from their former political enemies. Everett further says the healing of the nation and the vitalisation of its political life can only occur when the religious bodies have clearly differentiated themselves from any particular party.<sup>19</sup> During the NCLC, church leaders are always being reminded of the danger of being both a church leader and a political party member.

In December 2012 church leaders issued a statement titled “*The church speaks...for such a time as this...*” This was accompanied by a covering letter signed by Archbishop Thabo Makgoba on behalf of the NCLC.<sup>20</sup> Conradie states that the statement was conveying a

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<sup>17</sup> See V. Mehana, 2014. ANC ‘respects God’s will’. In: <http://www.thenewage.co.za> [Accessed 27 February 2014].

<sup>18</sup> See V. Mehana, 2014. ANC ‘respects God’s will’. In: <http://www.thenewage.co.za> [Accessed 27 February 2014].

<sup>19</sup> See W.J. Everett, 2013. Some reflections on the future of ecumenism: In: *South African Perspectives on Notions and Forms of Ecumenicity*: in Ernst M. Conradie (ed.) Sun Press, Stellenbosch, 2013, 94.

<sup>20</sup> The National Church Leaders’ Consultation is a meeting of senior Christian church leaders hosted by the Ecumenical Foundation of Southern Africa (EFSA) since January 2009 at the Lanzerac Hotel in Stellenbosch initially under the leadership of Presiding Bishop Ivan Abrahams of the Methodist Church of Southern Africa (MCSA). The EFSA Institute created a platform where the senior church leaders come together in a meeting to discuss common concerns, especially with regard to socio-political and economic issues of the country. On the last day of these meetings a press statement and a consultation statement that entails all the resolutions of the meeting were formulated and disseminated. The present chairperson of the NCLC Archbishop Thabo Makgoba was elected in 2011 when Bishop Ivan Abrahams received a new position as the General Secretary of the World Methodist Council in the USA. Amongst other things, it must be noted that the NCLC does not replace the church leaders’ forum meetings organised by the SACC. The EFSA Institute initiated a different platform for

message of warning to President Jacob Zuma that South Africa was sliding into a state of “moral decay” and observed that South Africans are yearning for leadership to restore hope amid growing unhappiness about a generation of leaders who seem to have largely lost their “moral compass.”<sup>21</sup> It must be noted that the concern of the church leaders regarding moral decay challenge in South Africa also emphasises the fact that churches are faced with the challenge of unity in order to influence morally good citizenship in society. This press release was just before the December 2012 ANC national conference in Mangaung, Free State.

This statement addressed various people of the South African society, namely, the church leaders, political leaders, economists and trade unions, as well as the poor and oppressed people in our land. The church leaders declared:

In faithfulness to our Lord, and in looking at South Africa post-Marikana and pre-Mangaung, we now speak out, in a moment that does indeed have the qualities of a *‘kairos moment’*, a special moment where we discern that God is speaking to us in a particularly urgent tones, a moment that requires transformational leadership and action. We could have opted to remain silent, as we are sometimes urged to be silent in evil times (Amos 5:13 and Ps. 37:7), but our silence at this crucial moment may be interpreted as consent or contentment, and for that reason and from a spirit of love, we now speak...<sup>22</sup>

In fact before the December 2012 statement the NCLC that met on 17-18 October 2011 at the Southern Sun hotel, O.R. Tambo International Airport made a similar remark regarding the state of the country with a very challenging title, “A Chronic State of Denial”, and declared:

Our nation is in a state of crisis – a crisis of dignity and discipline, a crisis of education and crisis in our communities. Together, the Christian community present at grass roots can help turn this situation around and help to restore the dignity of all the people we serve.<sup>23</sup>

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discussing the burning issues of the day in the country by the church leaders themselves. The NCLC was therefore established in January 2009 under EFSA for discussing common concerns and I currently serve in this forum as the secretary.

<sup>21</sup> See Conradie, *Notions and Forms of Ecumenicity*. 2013, 13.

<sup>22</sup> See [http://www.sacc.org.za/Dec2012/The\\_church\\_speaks.pdf](http://www.sacc.org.za/Dec2012/The_church_speaks.pdf) [Accessed 28 November 2012].

<sup>23</sup> See <http://www.nrasd.org.za/2011/10/20/national-church-leaders-a-chronic-state-of-denial> [Accessed 28 November 2012].

Further to this commitment by the church leaders on the statement, they also expressed their concern at the lack of disciplines at schools and indicated that the state and the church are both complicit in failing society; history will judge the church harshly. Church leaders further agreed that they cannot sweep these things under the carpet nor ignore their severity.<sup>24</sup> With this in mind it became evident that the church leaders needed to act and address the moral decay crisis in the country collectively.

For a very long time the voice of the church in South Africa was silent, especially regarding so many life threatening issues in South African society. Some church leaders such as Archbishop Desmond Tutu and Cardinal Wilfrid Napier of the Catholic Church in Durban publicly spoke out about some of the concerns in the media on their individual capacity, and not speaking on behalf of the church in South Africa. Indeed, South Africa is still sliding into a state of moral decay. Almost every day in South Africa we get news about incidents such as the gang raping of women and children, armed robberies, babies who are less than six months old being raped and kidnapped, parents involved in killing and raping their own children, corruption in government and even in churches, police being involved in rape, and many other gruesome stories. These are evident signs of moral decay in the country.

The church is in the position to take cautious steps and initiatives in addressing the need for true reconciliation and social justice in South Africa. In October 2012, in Wales the General Secretary of the WCC, Olav Fykse Tveit, in his speech on the theme “*The unity we seek: Reflections on ecumenism today*” gave an insightful remark on the role of the church towards peace. This also fits in our South African challenge regarding ecumenism and the morality today. He said:

Peace is the goal of any work for justice, a peace that is life giving, life-nurturing, bringing the elements of life together for the purpose of life together. Peace is something we understand better when we do not have it. The unity of the church needs the strong and rich concept of peace, shalom, saalam. The unity of the church requires efforts to overcome enmity, antagonism, condemnations, and

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<sup>24</sup> See <http://www.nrasd.org.za/2011/10/20/national-church-leaders-a-chronic-state-of-denial> [Accessed 28 November 2012].

conflict. But again, we do not need harmony that covers up the realities, only when peace is a just peace it can serve the real unity we seek.<sup>25</sup>

Fykse Tveit helps us to understand that the unity of the church and the unity in society will come only when true peace is accomplished and justice is allowed to flourish. Fykse Tveit states that making unity something real and experienced for churches is a challenge. The unity we seek and that the world needs is something that must be manifested in actions and structures, in fulfilling duties, being open to Christ's presence amongst us and being open to one another.<sup>26</sup> It is evident that the churches in South Africa need once again to strive for a meaning and purposeful ecumenism in order to guide the country towards a morally good country with morally good citizens.

In the December 2012 statement church leaders also acknowledged that they have not fulfilled their role in helping the country towards unity, reconciliation and social justice:

We confess that we have not fully implemented that which we declared in the Rustenberg declaration of 1990 (note - this problem tracks back as far as 1990) as well as other statements and declarations we have made. We confess that we have not always stood united against poverty and all that perpetuates the material needs of many millions in SA, that we have not fulfilled our role in helping to strengthen civil society, and that we have not cooperated with political and economic leaders to ensure abundant life for everyone in our country.<sup>27</sup>

Church leaders also revealed in the December 2012 statement that our disunity is often caused by ourselves, whilst other times it is also engineered by those who see our unity as a threat to their nefarious activities.<sup>28</sup> This crisis reflects the weakness of ecumenism and disunity of the churches in South Africa. It is evident that even if ecumenism in South Africa can exist amongst churches, but it is not meaningful and purposefully driven, such ecumenism will be useless, especially for the challenges we are facing today.

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<sup>25</sup> See O.F. Tveit, 2012. *The Unity We Seek: Reflections on Ecumenism Today*, 13 October 2012.

In: <http://www.oikoumene.org/general-secretary/speeches/the-unity-we-seek-reflections-on-ecumenism-today> [Accessed 8 November 2013].

<sup>26</sup> See Tveit, *The Unity We Seek: Reflections on Ecumenism Today*, 13 October 2012.

In: <http://www.oikoumene.org/general-secretary/speeches/the-unity-we-seek-reflections-on-ecumenism-today> [Accessed 8 November 2013].

<sup>27</sup> See <http://www.sacc.org.za/Dec2012/The church speaks.pdf> [Accessed 28 November 2012].

<sup>28</sup> See <http://www.sacc.org.za/Dec2012/The church speaks.pdf> [Accessed 28 November 2012].

The current crisis regarding morality in South Africa requires collective efforts from various stakeholders such as government, Faith-Based Organisations (FBO's), Non-Governmental Organisations (NGO's, the religious sector and other stakeholders to take part in changing the state of our country. As far as the church is concerned, there is a need for an ecumenical structure that can speak on behalf of the churches regarding socio-ethical challenges of the time. It is in this context in which the interest in the theme of this dissertation on church unity and social contexts is investigated and that throughout the chapters of this dissertation I have pointed out that church unity can play a significant role in society where reconciliation and social justice is much needed.

#### **8.4. The significance of church unity and social contexts**

The challenge of unity and disunity of the churches in the world is not a new subject in the ecumenical world. This has been addressed by the WCC as a weakness and as a serious challenge towards the witness and service of the church in the world. This is exactly what the Life and Work conference of the WCC in Stockholm (1925) declared in the statement: "The world is too strong for a divided church".

Later, the Emeritus Archbishop Desmond Tutu shared the same sentiment at the Fifth conference on Faith and Order (1994) when he declared that "Apartheid was too strong for a divided church", describing the unity of the church a 'practical imperative' and calling.<sup>29</sup> From these remarks, the significance of church unity in social contexts is tested and affirmed. The hypothesis of this study is also affirmed here, namely that church unity is highly significant for social contexts and societal renewal. For decades these two statements have remained the biggest challenge for the church in its dealing with internal unity that could express itself meaningfully in the form of ecumenism.

The previous chapters raised some challenging questions that also form part of the set of questions for this dissertation, which could be phrased as follows: Why do we need unity? What is the cost of this church unity? What is the significance of church unity for social contexts? What role can the unity of the church play in society renewal? Can church unity be

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<sup>29</sup> See F. Theron, 2003. The Meaning of the Unity of the Church – an Ecumenical Perspective: In Eddy Van der Borgh (ed.), *Affirming and Living with Differences. Studies in Reformed Theology* 12, 2003, 171.

a powerful source in creating morally good citizenship? These questions sought to explore the relation between what the church is and what the church does in social contexts. The answer to these questions is complemented by a discussion of the already outlined relations between the Ecclesiology and Ethics debate and the Belhar Confession debate on the role of the church towards society. Both debates affirm that ecclesiology and ethics belong together. It is evident that the unity of the church is crucial for transformation in social contexts.

This concern for both the life of humanity and that of creation became one of the leading discussions during the second Stellenbosch Consensus hosted by the EFSA Institute, Stellenbosch and the Social Chamber of the Evangelische Kirche in Deutschland (EKD) Hannover on 5-7 February 2013 at Lanzerac hotel, Stellenbosch. The consultation wrote a 20 theses document as outcomes of the discussion regarding the concern for the earth. The Consensus expressed the concern about the direction that the journey of humankind on this planet entrusted to us by God has taken. The Consensus states that the excessive use of natural resources by human beings and an ever-increasing amount of CO<sub>2</sub> emissions has led to a continuous destruction of the earth. Whilst many people still live in poverty and others in affluence, and economic and social inequality are increasing.<sup>30</sup> The Consensus further affirmed and confessed that churches have not fulfilled their responsibility to care for God's creation in the way they are called to do. This underlines the fact that churches have a huge responsibility towards social contexts and that Christians are stewards of creation.

Another significant document that articulates the responsibility of the church towards creation especially regarding its call for justice, peace, for the integrity of creation is the declaration of the Uniting Reformed Church in Southern Africa and the Evangelical Reformed Church of Germany. In the book titled: *Dreaming a Different World. Globalisation and Justice for Humanity and the Earth. The Challenge of Accra Confession for the Churches*, these churches declare:

We are shocked by stories of injustice worldwide and disturbed by accounts of ecological destruction; we are moved by experiences of oppression, violence and being violated; experiences of exclusion and marginalization, often of minorities;

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<sup>30</sup> See <http://www.nrasd.org.za/the-second-stellenbosch-consensus-20-theses-on-sustainable-growth> [Accessed 20 October 2013]. The 20 theses start by affirming that we are responsible for our actions and that we can influence the course of our future. It further suggests for a fundamental transformation of our global economy toward low carbon development and a new, low resource model of prosperity. Further to this it also clearly points out that transformation includes a change of social norms and values for the common good of humankind and creation.

experience of human trafficking and modern-day slavery; experiences of vulnerability and neglect, lack of education, employment, protection, health, dignity, more often than not the experiences of women and children.

These churches further declare:

Therefore we lament – with the cries of your afflicted people and the wounds of your suffering creation. Together, from North and South, we are comforted by the gospel, by the common faith we share and the common tradition in which we stand, by your Word and Spirit. Being claimed by you, we long together for your reign of justice and peace, for your presence and your salvation – for freedom from these disturbing realities, these harsh inequalities, this cultural domination, this abysmal disparity, this injustice, this destruction; we dream of your promises of *shalom*. We cry and plead, we sigh and pray together for our broken and threatened world. Praying, we commit ourselves together to care for your creatures and your creation.<sup>31</sup>

The 10<sup>th</sup> Assembly of the WCC that took place in Busan, Korea on 30 October to 8 November 2013 also revealed that church unity can play a significant role in social contexts, especially regarding social justice and peace in the world. This role of the church was addressed under these sub-themes of the Assembly: Unity, peace, and the justice of God. The main theme of the WCC 10<sup>th</sup> Assembly was “*God of life, lead us to justice and peace.*”<sup>32</sup> During his report the General Secretary, Olav Fykse Tveit, observed that the assembly meets in a time when life of God’s creation is more under threat than it has ever been. He states that the globe cannot carry the sum of all the developments and the crises that are present and those which are likely to come. He observes that:

So many things point to crisis: the overconsumption of energy resources, the devastating effects of emissions into our common air and atmosphere, the natural disasters that are made worse due to these effects, the exploitation of nature as we consume energy, food, fresh air than this globe can sustain, and all the while

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<sup>31</sup> See Boesak, A. Weusmann, J. & Amjad-Ali, C. (eds.), 2010. *Dreaming a Different World: Globalisation and Justice for Humanity and the Earth. The Challenge of the Accra Confession for the Churches*. 2010, 80-81.

<sup>32</sup> See O.F. Tveit [https://www.oikumene.org/documents/assembly/2013-busan/report\\_of\\_the\\_general\\_secretary](https://www.oikumene.org/documents/assembly/2013-busan/report_of_the_general_secretary) [Accessed: 8 November 2013].



human beings are marginalized and excluded from the life of the world economy as it is. Many of the poor are becoming even poorer.<sup>33</sup>

These observations point to the fact that the church cannot be silent when humanity and nature suffer these injustices. The church as called by God to witness and serve the world and the rest of God's creation must run the risk of maintaining the order of creation so that all may have life, and have it in abundance (John 10:10). The churches can no longer remain silent in cases of misery and the suffering of God's people and creation. The church is called to preserve life, to be a peacemaker, and to serve justice in the world where there is a huge gap between the rich and the poor. This touches on the significance of the church's vocation in society, especially its prophetic role on issues of peace, reconciliation and justice, as well as its priestly task regarding caring for the needy and those who suffer injustices. The ecclesiology and ethics debate in the Belhar Confession explains these tasks very clearly, especially the articles on reconciliation and justice. Belhar even further concludes that the church must stand where God stands, against injustice and with the wronged; that in following Christ the church must witness against all the powerful and privileged who selfishly seek their own interests and thus control and harm others.<sup>34</sup>

In the search for this prophetic and priestly roles of the church, the director of UNAIDS South Africa, Catherine Sozi, challenged the church leaders during the NCLC in Johannesburg October 2013. In her presentation titled "*More than a prayer: Your response to sexual violence and HIV*"<sup>35</sup>, Sozi observed that whilst we have known all along that women and girls still face a higher risk of HIV infection and that violence, specifically sexual violence, fuels the epidemic in women and girls, our actions are cause for concern. She mentioned that during her visit to the Eastern Cape three weeks before the consultation, she attended a traditional ceremony that was held after a month-long workshop that taught adolescent girls their values of looking after themselves and the promotion of abstinence.

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<sup>33</sup> See Tveit [https://www.oikumene.org/documents/assembly/2013-busan/report\\_of\\_the\\_general\\_secretary](https://www.oikumene.org/documents/assembly/2013-busan/report_of_the_general_secretary) [Accessed: 8 November 2013].

<sup>34</sup> See J. Botha and P. Naudé, 2011. The Belhar Confession (1986): in Johan Botha and Piet Naudé: *Good News to Confess: The Belhar Confession and the road of acceptance*, Bible Media, Wellington, 2011, 22.

<sup>35</sup> See C. Sozi, 2013. *More than a prayer: Your response to sexual violence and HIV*, Johannesburg, 2013, 1-8. Unpublished paper. This paper was read at the Consultation of the Church Leaders on the 15 October 2013 in Johannesburg and is available at the office of the National Religious Association for Social Development (NRASD) on request.



Sozi states that during this process it became evident that one of the teenage girls was being repeatedly raped by her uncle, in the homestead. Sozi further observed:

As many survivors do, she and her mother turned to her church for support, but found it lacking in many ways. For one, both felt that they were being blamed for the actions of the uncle – the same sentiments followed at the police and court. There are many such examples. A question often asked by victims of sexual violence – who do we turn to? Do I turn to my priest? Would he be receptive if I turned to him for support? How will he react when he hears the rapist is my husband? Those who have been sexually assaulted suffer in silence due to the stigma associated with the crime.<sup>36</sup>

Sozi's presentation invited the church leaders to not only reflect on these realities, but to also act upon such challenges. It must be noted that some of these perpetrators and victims could be Christians and members of our churches. The presentation further underlined why church unity and ecumenism are so crucial for social contexts where these incidents take place. Sozi further pleaded with the church leaders to engage church members and society in a holistic way in dealing with sexual violence, domestic abuse and other socio-ethical challenges. Sozi raises the issues of concern that were also discussed in chapter two of this dissertation, especially under the theme of "A Community of Women and Men." The authentic and true unity of the church can help society to have meaningful households and marriages, meaningful relationships and communion in society, as well as responsible citizens in social contexts. Because of the nature of its calling, the church has no choice but to be involved in social contexts in witness and in service. Hence, the church in Ecclesiology and Ethics debate in chapter four of this dissertation is seen and called a social ethic. In most cases Christians and churches are heavily criticised of being heavenly minded but ethically useless.

The significance of church unity in social contexts was expressed in a fundamental way during the struggle of the church against apartheid. The evidence to this is much clearer in the previous chapters, especially in chapter five on the unity of the church and the divisions of apartheid. The unity of the church must express itself in social contexts where the real challenges of divisions, exploitation, human trafficking, rape, enmity, hatred, xenophobia, injustices, a gap between rich and the poor, poverty, lack of peace and reconciliation, racism,

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<sup>36</sup> See Sozi, *More than a prayer: Your response to sexual violence and HIV*. 2013, 3.

stigmatisation, victimisation of homosexual persons, and the destruction of God's creation still exist in society. I concur with Fykse Tveit when he states that unity is an expression of life given by God and a way to live in a new solidarity; we see the significance of the gift and calling of unity in the body of Christ. For him, Christian unity is inextricably connected to the unity of all humanity and creation. Fykse Tveit concludes:

We know too well the pain of injustices and conflicts that lead to disunity – the discrimination that occurs in society because of race or gender or economic status or many other factors; the violence between and even more now within nations; disconnection from the land.<sup>37</sup>

### **8.5. Some lessons for the Dutch Reformed family of churches on unity and some motifs awaiting continuing further exploration**

The unity of the church is not just about fulfilling the dream of the church to be one as expressed in John 17, but it is also about living out this unity in a practical way both in and outside of the church by paying attention to social realities such as disunity that disrupt the quality of life regarding harmony, peace and justice for all. It seems that the DR family of churches presently only exhaust their energy by aiming for the unity of these churches without paying much attention to their vocation in witnessing to justice issues in South African society, especially after the deep wounds caused by the apartheid tragedy. The unity of these churches is very important as much of their witness against all injustices also affected the unity of these sister churches in a very painful way.

A question could be asked as to what the DR family of churches do together that can serve as a symbol of an authentic unity, a reflection of reconciliation and justice in contemporary South Africa. The Ecclesiology and Ethics debate of the WCC and the ecclesiology and ethics debate in the Belhar Confession of the URCSA can help these churches towards making a significant contribution in the South African context where the realities of racial divisions, the lack of reconciliation and justice, the gap between the rich and the poor still dominates in society. Indeed, the unification of the DR family of churches will impact positively on reconciliation and justice in South Africa. It will help the people to come closer

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<sup>37</sup> See Tveit [https://www.oikumene.org/documents/assembly/2013-busan/report\\_of\\_the\\_general\\_secretary](https://www.oikumene.org/documents/assembly/2013-busan/report_of_the_general_secretary) [Accessed: 8 November 2013].

to one another, and share what they have with one another. Those who were strangers for a very long time because of racism and discrimination in church and society will learn through the Belhar Confession that the God of unity calls us to true reconciliation with one another, which is very costly, and that for such reconciliation to take place we need to change the status quo by appealing to the social justice of God.

I must state that the cost of reconciliation starts with an individual's willingness to forgive. There is no reconciliation without forgiveness because reconciliation is the fruit of forgiveness. Reconciliation means that the process of forgiving and forgiveness has been walked through to achieve reconciliation. The process of forgiveness is the most painful exercise towards reconciliation. If this process fails then it becomes very difficult to have reconciled people and a reconciled society. The theme of the book by Archbishop Desmond Tutu, which reads *No Future without Forgiveness*<sup>38</sup>, seems to explain this point much clearer that you cannot reach the goal of reconciliation without going through the painful exercise of acceptance and forgiveness. The lack of reconciliation in South Africa is because people still find it difficult to forgive, especially when justice is still in question. This also has serious implications for unity and reconciliation between the DR family churches members, especially after the whole question of racial prejudice in the church.

The contest against church division on racial grounds is further radically challenged by the notion of the body of Christ. The notion defines a diverse ecclesial unity of significance where differences regarding culture, race, language and skills, including abilities and disabilities, are recognised and celebrated. Although the unity of the URCSA is not yet fully expressed as described in 1 Corinthians 12 in the form of the notion of the body of Christ, the members of this church have taken a step further by recognising that they need one another. For the unity of this church to work and be visible in the world, the URCSA members must learn what it means to be together within the same body, irrespective of their differences. For the unity of the DR family of churches to be effective and visible in the world and in South Africa at large specifically, these churches need to embody and live the Belhar Confession and the notion of the body of Christ in full.

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<sup>38</sup> See D.M. Tutu, 1999. *No Future without Forgiveness*: Rider Books, Random House, South Africa.

The notion of the body of Christ holds the promise to help us to acknowledge our differences, our abilities and disabilities, our strengths and weaknesses, and further, to understand that we are weaker without the others around us. The only hope for renewal of society and the restoration of our dignity, as people, is to realise that we belong to each other. We should constantly keep in mind that the unity to which God has called us is very costly. This unity within the body of Christ means that we must commit ourselves to each other in expressing the costly implications of the unity we seek. We should strive to look at each other through the eyes of Christ. The obedience that we give to God must also serve as obedience to one another.<sup>39</sup> In this way we also learn that church unity is a gift and calling. The church as the body of Christ is intertwined with God with and with one another in Spirit. The members of the body of Christ in their unity are actively in solidarity with one another whilst their diversity is enriched and celebrated at the same time.

It is evident that the URCSA still struggles in dealing with this unity in diversity within the same body. The unity of this church is still questionable, especially with regard to embodying the Belhar Confession. Although there are certain achievements in the endeavours for the unity of the DR family of churches, especially with regard to the acceptance of the Belhar Confession by the DRC, the joint legitimisation of URCSA and DRC theological students at Stellenbosch University and joint celebrations of important church events, the fact is that these churches are still racially divided.<sup>40</sup> The internal unity of the URCSA faces the same challenge of racially divided congregations. The question can be asked why, in the period of twenty years of unity within the URCSA, is it justifiable that the congregations of this church are still racially divided? Can we conclude that the DRC's motivation for separate church buildings for specific racial groups was necessary? With regard to this reality of racially divided churches, does the URCSA understand and interpret Belhar differently than the DRC pertaining to church unity? It is evident that the internal unity of the URCSA is still facing

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<sup>39</sup> See S. Mahokoto, 2010. Human Dignity and Church Re-Unification in the Family of Dutch Reformed Churches. In: *Scriptura 104, International Journal of Bible, Religion and Theology in Southern Africa*, 2010, 312.

<sup>40</sup> It can be argued that there are strong racial tensions between the members of the URCSA themselves and this is visible in many respects. This cannot be ignored just because this church strives for unity or it may disturb the process. The tensions need to be brought forward and addressed. However, the unity with other Reformed family of churches could add more tension and be disastrous in the process if these tensions are not attended to and radically challenged. One witness to this tension was the racial challenge within the URCSA when I was told to pull out my curriculum vitae for the ministerial position advertised by the 'Coloured' URCSA Sarepta. The reason that I was given when I questioned this command was that the Coloured people will not accept me as a Black Xhosa-speaking person as their minister in charge. It can be concluded that this could be one of the reasons why the URCSA congregations are still racially divided. Moreover, socially, apartheid has caused much tension between racial groups in South Africa and to correct this damage requires special attention and research.

some serious challenges pertaining to visible inclusiveness. It seems that the history of segregation and apartheid is repeating itself pertaining to these divisions within the URCSA itself and the rest of the DR family of churches. Within the URCSA there are “us” and “them” expressions that reflects the reality of this division between racial groups in this church. These expressions of division realities are all over the DR family of churches.

There is still much to be done regarding the unity of the URCSA on congregational levels as a way of embodying the unity of the body of Christ as also described in the Belhar Confession. The practical functioning of the body of Christ and its visible communion is totally dependent on the participation of all the members within it. For the process of the unity of these sister churches to be fruitful and visible, congregants on a local level need to be engaged in the process of negotiations. Amongst other serious challenges within the URCSA that will also affect the unity of the DR family of churches, has to do with the language that will not exclude others. The communication language can either build or destroy the endeavours for church unity. The members of the DR family of churches need to be honest with each other on how much this unity means for them as the body of Christ and for the world. As members of the same body they need to embrace each other in all respects. Being in communion with Christ should also strengthen our communion with each other in a special way. For this communion to be visible for the world to see requires our costly commitment to each other and this must be done in a costly obedience to God, who called us and assembled us in this communion.

Within the notion of the body of Christ, unity is embraced and lived, diversity is embraced, celebrated and enriched; and justice is practised and served to all and by all the members of the body. Only through this solidarity will peace and reconciliation remain a remarkable tool in the world for unity and justice. The members of the body welcome each other, help each other and serve each other through all life experiences. Yet when one member suffers, they all suffer together. This is the true reflection of church unity that we need to embody. On the one hand, the notion of the body of Christ helps us to explore the function and embodiment of the internal unity of the church whilst on the other hand we also have to understand the vocation of the church in society in the same manner, as Christ actively involved in society, seeking reconciliation and justice. The notion of the body teaches about *ecclesiology* (costly unity of the church) and the implications of such unity pertaining to *ethics* (costly commitment and costly obedience to issues of equality, peace, reconciliation and justice) at

the same time. This notion clearly shows what church unity entails and how this should function in a practical and visible way.

The existing church unity of the URCSA puts this church to a test as far as its own Belhar Confession is concerned. The question whether this church understands the content of its own confession and whether it embodies it needs to be investigated. The challenge for the URCSA and the DR family of churches at large is the disconnection between reality (especially of division and inequalities) and the values of the unity of the church enshrined in the Belhar Confession. The members of the DR family of churches must understand that it does not help that they acknowledge the values within the Belhar Confession but live differently from them. These churches cannot acknowledge the significance of their doctrines on church unity and the life together as enshrined in the Belhar Confession whilst their practical Christian way of life is in opposition with these documents. This also applies to South African citizens that it does not really help that we acknowledge the values of our country's constitution, and live a different lifestyle from them. The crucial challenge is merely on living the Belhar Confession not just embracing the confession.

Living the Belhar Confession fully is also the biggest challenge for the URCSA as the church that first confessed this confession. Amongst other challenges is that there are very few members within the URCSA who even know the Belhar Confession and what it stands for. The URCSA and other sister churches need to take this seriously by using Belhar more often during church services in liturgies, hosting workshops, conferences, and study groups on Belhar. This confession is even rarely used by some congregations except during combined services of the URCSA. In order to live the Belhar Confession, the members of the URCSA need to embrace, preach, teach and live this confession. Perhaps one can argue that without embodying and understanding the heart of the Belhar Confession and the notion of the body of Christ within the settings of the DR family of churches our unity will be very fragile. This family of churches cannot teach the world about the significance of the Belhar Confession without living its message.

The late Reformed theologian Lukas Vischer quotes the work of John Calvin on church unity, saying:

Miserable indeed is the union which is unconnected with God and it is that unconnected with God which alienates us from His truth. And that he might

recommend to us an agreement in Christ, He teaches us how necessary it is, for God is not truly glorified by us, unless the hearts of all agree in giving Him praise.<sup>41</sup>

It becomes evident that the unity of the church is intertwined with God. The DR family of churches does not only have the task of accomplishing unity, but also of witnessing and serving the South African society that struggles to forgive, reconcile, and come to terms with the new realities. Our unity in Christ as the church should be visible, and it should be practical by all means, so that the world can believe that God has sent Christ to the world and that the church represents Christ in the world. Amongst other practical ways of showing this unity to the world is to witness to justice issues. Within the unity of the body of Christ members must embrace justice, peace and reconciliation as symbols of this unity. Although it falls beyond the scope of this study to give offer a thorough theological reflection on the notion of the body of Christ, it does want to affirm the promise for the notion for bridging the gap between ecclesiology and ethics, between church unity and the struggle for reconciliation and justice.

The notion of Ubuntu is an African concept that might also enrich ecclesial discourses that seek to understand the close relationship between reconciliation and justice. Ubuntu is about the idea that a human person is a person through other persons. Ubuntu is – if viewed in Christian theological terms – to look at Christ through the eyes of the other. Archbishop Desmond Tutu writes:

Ubuntu means that in a real sense even the supporters of apartheid were victims of the vicious system which they implemented and which they supported so enthusiastically. Our humanity was intertwined. The humanity of the perpetrator of apartheid's atrocities was caught up and bound up in that of his victim whether he like it or not.<sup>42</sup>

Tutu is of the opinion that restorative justice was another kind of justice that was characteristic of traditional African jurisprudence. He points out that the central concern is not retribution or punishment, but in the spirit of Ubuntu it is the healing of breaches, the redressing of imbalances, and the restoration of broken relationships.

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<sup>41</sup> See L. Vischer, 2000. *Pia Conspiratio Calvin on the Unity of Christ's Church*. John Knox Series, No.12, Geneva, 2000, 14.

<sup>42</sup> See D. M. Tutu, 1999. *No Future without Forgiveness*: Rider Books, Random House, South Africa, 1999, 35.



Russel Botman, in his definition of Ubuntu, links it to hospitality and compassion. As he puts it:

It is Ubuntu to love and care for others, to be kindly towards others, to be hospitable. It is Ubuntu to be just and fair to be compassionate and to help others in distress. It is Ubuntu to be truthful and honest so that people know that one's word is one's honour. It is Ubuntu to be the Church in Africa.<sup>43</sup>

Botman's definition probes us not to separate our understanding of Ubuntu and compassionate justice because Ubuntu is to love and care for others. Botman underscores that we live by the promise of the transformation of the human race, the creation of wholeness, sharing and justice in the 'household of God'. For him, a household is a place of dialogue and the members within the household are a community where a dialogical communication between people of different genders, ethnic origins, economic status, or religious orientation frequently flows.<sup>44</sup> Within the household of God, the members of the household resort to dialogue when dealing with conflict for the sake of encouraging peace, true reconciliation and justice. This is what the church is called and stands for, to be the household of God for the sake of visible unity of the members of God's household, living in peace and truly reconciled with each other, and striving for the compassionate justice of God towards those who are in need. However, within this household of God that embraces Ubuntu, the members of this household welcome each other in a hospitable way.

In his description of hospitality received during his visits at Beyers Naudé's home, Robert Vosloo helps us develop the notion of Ubuntu even further. Vosloo argues that hospitality is the welcoming openness towards the other and otherness – towards the stranger, strangeness and even estrangement. For Vosloo, hospitality is strongly associated with metaphors relating

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<sup>43</sup> See R. Botman, 1995. Dealing with Diversity: In Duncan Buchanan and Jurgens Hendriks (eds.) *Meeting the Future: Christian Leadership in South Africa*, Pretoria, 1995, 169. Piet Naudé also cites Albert Nolan's book titled *God in South Africa*, where Albert Nolan underscores that Ubuntu is the most important African concept to depict the shift from being "objects of" to being "subjects in" society. Naudé further notes that Malusi Mpumlwana also seeks equivalence between Ubuntu and imago Dei as God is reflected in love for the other, especially with regard to the practice of social love marked by hospitality and accommodation of the other. Furthermore, Naudé reflects on the work of Russel Botman, who links the concept of Ubuntu to Dietrich Bonhoeffer's Christological definition of community: Christ exists as community. The question "who is Jesus Christ for us today?" reveals itself as the question of the very existence of the inquirer and it is the question about love for one's neighbor, says Botman. Russel Botman concludes that the 'who' question provides a link to Ubuntu as a communitarian notion of being –in-community. See Piet Naudé, 2010. *Neither Calendar nor Clock*: 2010, 181.

<sup>44</sup> See Botman, Dealing with Diversity: 1995, 168-169.



to the home and it recalls for him the idea of an open home in which there is space for others.<sup>45</sup> The notion of hospitality by Vosloo and the idea of the household of God by Botman can be linked in describing what Ubuntu is and what it means. For the DR family of churches to understand the cost of their unity, they need to understand each other as strangers welcomed by Christ to the household, which is his body.

The main challenge for the DR family of churches is the breaking of the long reserved racial tensions and inequalities that contaminated the life in society. It can be argued that the invisible internal unity of the URCSA represents a vulnerable church in a vulnerable social context of South Africa where the church still needs to find its prophetic voice. This reflects the tension between ecclesiology and ethics. The prophetic voice of the church is the church's witness against social ills such as inequalities, injustices and divisions. The prophetic voice of the Reformed churches in South Africa is lost, especially with regard to socio-ethical challenges such as the rape of women and children, xenophobia, corruption in government and in all spheres of society, and alarming crime. Given the challenge of invisible unity of the DR family of churches and the challenge of ecumenism in South Africa, one can declare the church not only as a vulnerable church, but also as a church with many disabilities, such as lack of reconciliation and justice, lack of embracing others, lack of forgiveness, and many others.

The bitterness and anger of what happened in the past, as well as the meeting of the strangers of the DR family of churches at the entrance of the household of God is radically challenged in the unity of the body of Christ. It can be said that hospitality within the household reflects Ubuntu in thousands of ways. The feeling of safety, protection, love, welcoming, acceptance and equality within a household of God describes the heart of God is hospitable God and the God who embraces Ubuntu. Vosloo writes the image of a secure home transforms that which is "not-home" or "outside of home" into a terrain fraught with danger whose inhabitants are viewed as a constant threat.<sup>46</sup> The disunity of the DR family of churches resembled a household of injustice and enmity and that these family churches need to look at the justice of God as the main requirement for membership in this household. The crucial part of belonging

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<sup>45</sup> See R. Vosloo, 2006. Hospitality and Truth-telling: Revisiting the Witness of Beyers Naudé. In: Len Hansen and Robert Vosloo (eds.) *Oom Bey for the Future: Engaging the Witness of Beyers Naudé*. SUN Press, Stellenbosch, 2006, 130.

<sup>46</sup> See Vosloo, Hospitality and Truth-telling: 2006, 130.

to this household of God is that the members of the body of Christ must show hospitality and Ubuntu to each other, irrespective of their gains and losses, just and injustices of the past.

There are a lot of unresolved issues within the ranks of the DR family of churches. People were alienated and segregated from one another for a long period of time. There is enmity, lack of forgiveness and reconciliation amongst people, and a wide gap of inequalities. The unity of the DR family of churches is very costly indeed. In situations like these, I think the DR family of churches must remind itself and use the words of former president Nelson Mandela, who once said that: “To make peace with an enemy, one must work with that enemy, and that enemy becomes your friend and partner in the future.”<sup>47</sup> This also fits in with the understanding of the notion of the body of Christ where strange members of the body help each other in order to keep the unity of the household in shape and keep it from being destroyed.

## 8.6. Conclusion

Throughout this dissertation the role of the church towards social contexts has been explored. The Ecclesiology and Ethics debate of the WCC and the Belhar Confession ecclesiology and ethics debate clearly points this relationship between ecclesiology and ethics out and also what significance it has towards social contexts. This study stresses the fact that, theologically speaking, there is no ecclesiology without ethics and no ethics without ecclesiology. This means that ecclesiology and ethics cannot be disconnected from each other. The unity of the church must find expression in its witness and service in the world. The lack of unity makes it difficult and sometimes impossible for the church to deal with socio-ethical challenges, where in most cases the church is expected to respond or act upon them. The concluding chapter underlines this challenge of the church by referring to the reality of disunity and lack of ecumenism as the biggest challenge, especially for the South African context. The absence of the prophetic voice of the church also contributes to the challenge of moral decay in society because the church is expected to be the moral compass for society and the rest of the world.

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<sup>47</sup> See Brian Frost, 1998. *Struggling to Forgive: Nelson Mandela and South Africa's search for Reconciliation*. Harper Collins London, 11.

The interference of South African government in religious sector affairs complicates the goal towards meaningful and purposeful ecumenism. One wonders whether the envisaged church and state relations by government does not repeat the history of the relations between the DRC and the state during the heydays of apartheid in South Africa. This is exactly what the Reformed theologian Johan Cilliers raised in his article titled *Preaching between Assimilation and Separation: Perspectives on Church and State in South African Society*, when he described the basic hermeneutical structure underlining apartheid preaching when there was a complete assimilation of the Dutch Reformed Church into the state in terms of its historical analogies, moralistic trends and stigmatisation of the enemy. I can conclude with Cilliers regarding the present situation of South African ecumenism challenge and the future of the church and state relations in South Africa, where he writes:

It is difficult, if not impossible, to predict how the future scenario in South Africa will turn out with regard to the relationship between church and state. What is clear in my opinion, however, is that the different churches (denominations) will have to *cross borders* in order to be enriched and guided by the other. We will have to move beyond *denominationalism*, if we hope to have any impact in society. We will have to revisit the *hermeneutical space of the ecumenical church* in order to address societal ills in our country, also by means of preaching.<sup>48</sup>

Cilliers goes on to say that it is exactly within this hermeneutical space that we discover not a self-destructive “stability”, but rather our true identity; not a misleading introversion, but rather vocation (to help transform society); not stigmatisation of, and separation from the other, but rather the experience of facing the other and, in doing so, facing ourselves – and in the end, hopefully, the Other.<sup>49</sup>

As things presently stand with regard to this church and state relationship in South Africa, the church will find it very difficult to critically engage government of serious issues of concern. However, church unity proves to be one fundamental tool in finding ways of dealing with societal evils that destroy the meaning of life in abundance. Church unity is needed and it is necessary for various reasons related to the quality of life together and for the sake of the other. It must be a fruitful unity for both the church and society. The notion of the body of

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<sup>48</sup> See J.H. Cilliers, 2008. *Preaching between Assimilation and Separation: Perspectives on Church and State in South African Society*. This paper was read on 19-20 June 2008 at the Homiletics Seminar for Danish Pastors in Copenhagen. 2008, 16.

<sup>49</sup> See Cilliers, *Preaching between Assimilation and Separation*: 2008, 16-17.

Christ and the notion of Ubuntu are significant in this regard for not only directing us to the kind of unity we seek, but also towards the significance of such unity for social transformation. The notion of the body of Christ and the notion of Ubuntu also helps us further to discover our identity, as we belong to the same household of God. These notions also strongly emphasise the significant interdependence and equality in this unity and in the household of God, as mentioned earlier by Cilliers, and they deserve further (theological) exploration.

The church in South Africa needs to regain its prophetic voice and try by all means to be there with those who are on the margins of society. It does not help that the church preaches the unity, peace, reconciliation and social justice of God if it stands aloof from those who suffer injustices in society. Because of its nature and calling to unity, to service and to witness in the world, the church must fulfil its prophetic and priestly tasks in society. The unity of the DR family of churches can play a fundamental role in the existing crisis of ecumenism and moral decay in South African society. If the churches can unite and have a unified voice on ethical issues of peace and justice in society, an indispensable contribution will be made in South Africa and the world.

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